WESTERN ACTION

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

First Magazine Publication

SHOOTING STAR By L. W. Emerson

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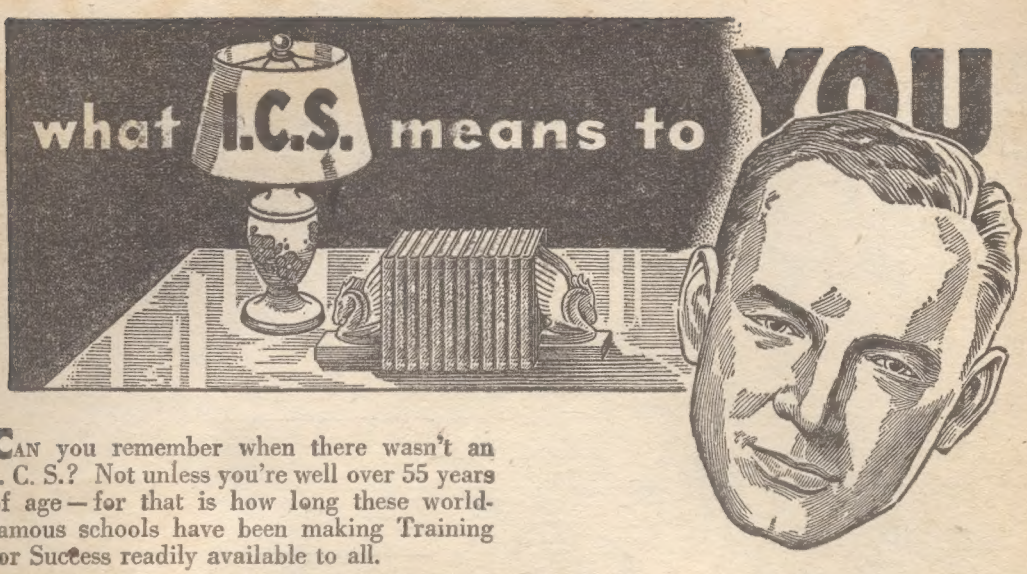

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WESTERN ACTION

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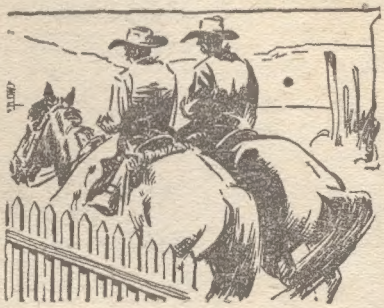
Volume II | August, 1947 | Number 6

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION)

SHOOTING STAR
By L. W. Emerson 10

Chance Gilbert knew that Molly Mulloy was the girl for him, but the only way he could protect her was to ruin her business completely!



SHORT STORIES

WIRED FOR SIXES ..... By Leo Charles 88

Flint Lynn figured that he'd given enough of his life and health for the railroad—and small thanks he'd gotten for it. Now he'd not lift a finger for them!

WHIZZERS ..... By The Cowpoke 104

Tall and hairy stories about the men of the old West.

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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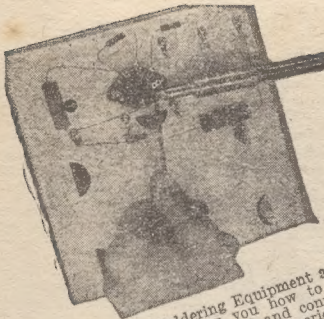

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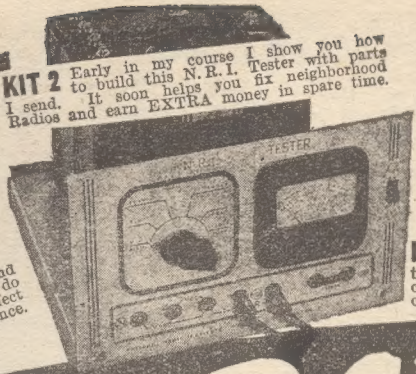

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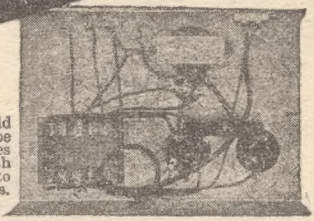

KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

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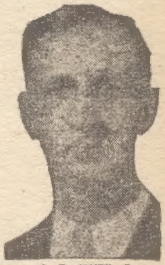

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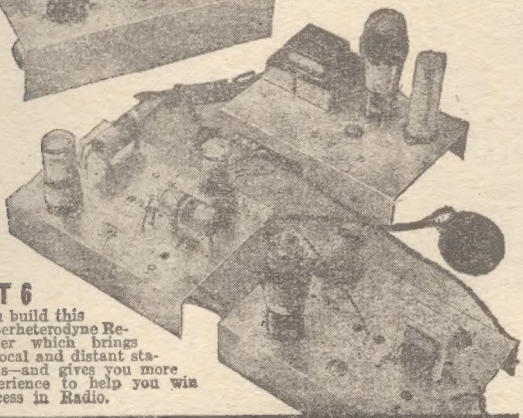

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You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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ADVICE TO READERS:

who are suffering the miseries of

BAD SKIN

Stop Worrying Now About Pimples and Blackheads

and other externally caused skin troubles

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS

SQUEEZING pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Because doing so may also be injurious and leave your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally caused skin troubles. You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.

Good-Looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same healthy, normal complexion free from externally caused skin troubles simply by giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime*—something that ordinary cleansing may not do. In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of incomplete or faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser which penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic When followed by a quick application of Viderm Medicated Skin Cream, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out, they dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free of the specks that often bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it Skin is delicate When you break it, you leave yourself wide open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear and blemish-free complexion.

It's Foolish to Take Bad Skin for Granted

It doesn't pay to risk marred skin, blotches, blemishes. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsomeness and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes a skin that looks unhealthy, unclean, abused, and marked with blackheads or pimples. WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, ROBUST-LOOKING SKIN Business executives don't choose men who have a poor-looking complexion. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive Viderm formula may help you.

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to keep it smooth and clear. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

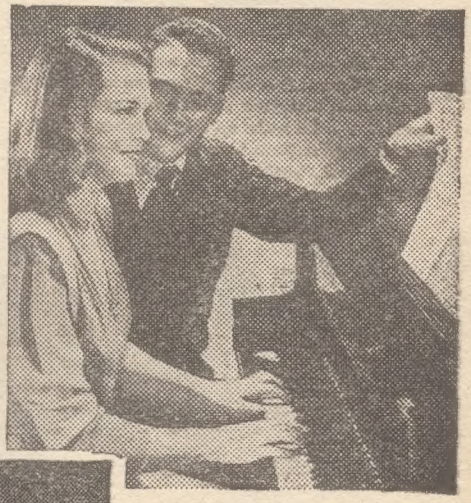
Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident that you will keep a smooth and clear complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment; then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smooth, clear skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 188, New York City 2, New York. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.

They Never Knew It Was SO EASY To Play

Thousands Now Play Popular Songs Who Didn't Know a Note of Music Before

You, too, can learn your favorite instrument at home, without a teacher, this quick, easy, money-saving way



THINK of the fun YOU are missing! The popularity friendship, good times! Why? Because you think it's hard to learn music. You have an idea that it's a slow, tedious task, with lots of boring drills and exercises.

That's not the twentieth-century way! Surely you've heard the news! How people all over the world have learned to play by a method so simple a child can understand it—so fascinating that it's like playing a game Imagine! You learn without a teacher—in your spare time at home—at a cost of only a few cents a day! You learn by the famous print-and-picture method—every position, every move before your eyes in big, clear illustrations. You CAN'T go wrong! And best of all, you start playing real tunes almost at once, from the very first lesson.

No needless, old fashioned "scales" and exercises. No confused, perplexing study. You learn to play by playing. It's thrilling, exciting, inspiring! No wonder hundreds of thousands of people have taken up music this easy way. No wonder enthusiastic letters like those reproduced here pour in from all over the world.

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Learned Quickly at Home. "I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time." *H. C. S., Calif.

Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open up a new world for you. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

Send for FREE Booklet and Print and Picture Sample

See for yourself how this wonderful self-instruction method works. Sit down, in the privacy of your own home, with the interesting illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home." No salesman will call—decide for yourself whether you want to play this easy way.

Invited to Parties. "Before I took your course I didn't know one note of music. Then three months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties. The course is easy and interesting." *R. M., Vancouver, B. C.

Well Worth Money. "The course is fully self explanatory. When one is finished with it there is little one need learn. It is well worth the money and I fully believe you have the finest course on the market today." R. E. G., Clarksburg, W. Va.

Surprised Friends. "People who hear me play don't understand how I do it. They ask if I haven't had lessons from a teacher. To their surprise they find I haven't. I'm glad to be a student of your School. *M. H., Athol, Kans.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional models

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Charles Atlas

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You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skinny." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—*"Dynamic Tension."* And it turned me into such a *complete* specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

That's how I traded in my "bag of bones" for a barrel of muscle! And I felt so much better, so much on *top of the world* in my big new, husky body, that I decided to devote my whole life to helping *other* fellows change themselves into "perfectly developed men."

What Is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you — then you'll be astonished at how *short* a time it takes *"Dynamic Tension"* to GET RESULTS!

"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room — JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY — while your scrawny shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!

As I've pictured up above, I'm steadily building broad-shouldered dynamic MEN — day by day — the country over.

2,000,000 fellows young and old, have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I'm building up scrawny bodies, and how I'm paring down fat, flabby ones — how I'm turning them into breath-taking human dynamos of pure MANPOWER.

Take just a few seconds NOW to fill in and mail the coupon at right, and you will receive at once my FREE book — "Everlasting Health and Strength"—that PROVES with actual snap-shots what *"Dynamic Tension"* has done for others — what it can do for YOU! Address: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept 48, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

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Don't Neglect Foot Itch

ATHLETE'S FOOT

....it may become DANGEROUS!

PEDILIN - This Wonderful, Tested Discovery

Paves The Way For New! Improved! Treatments!

Does your Athlete's Foot Itch drive you mad? Does that torturing itch compel you to hopelessly scratch away at your skin . . . only to find you have aggravated the condition? It has been estimated that anywhere from 50% to 90% of the people in this country are affected by this disease sometime during their lives. Now you, too, like thousands of other men and women may use PEDILIN — this amazing, new, scientific treatment for Athlete's Foot. You may not be aware that you are suffering from a mild case of Athlete's Foot at present.

USE PEDILIN - The New Foot Medicine

Special Formula Quickly Penetrates to Germs and Interferes with Its Spreading

The ingredients of PEDILIN were tested during the war on Navy Personnel, as well as others. The results of these tests indicated that one of the active ingredients of PEDILIN was more beneficial than many other treatments. This ingredient in this special formula helps interfere with the spreading of the Athlete's Foot germ. It takes fast action against the "hard-to-get-at" germs. Other ingredients of this formula help the badly affected skin.

Beware of these Symptoms

The symptoms of this disease at the start are small cracks between the toes and the peeling of the skin surrounding these cracks. Should you neglect your Athlete's Foot in its first stage, it may develop and spread throughout all your toes to the balls of your feet and arches. This is usually accompanied by an uncontrollable itching and scratching, which results in a badly, mutilated, ugly, infected condition of the skin.

Try PEDILIN NOW

A one month's supply costs you only one dollar. You would gladly pay much more than the small cost of this wonderful treatment to relieve yourself of the agonizing foot itching that interferes with your sleep, your work and social life. Don't miss this opportunity to help yourself with PEDILIN—medical sciences' sensational new discovery for the treatment of Athlete's Foot. Mail Coupon NOW!

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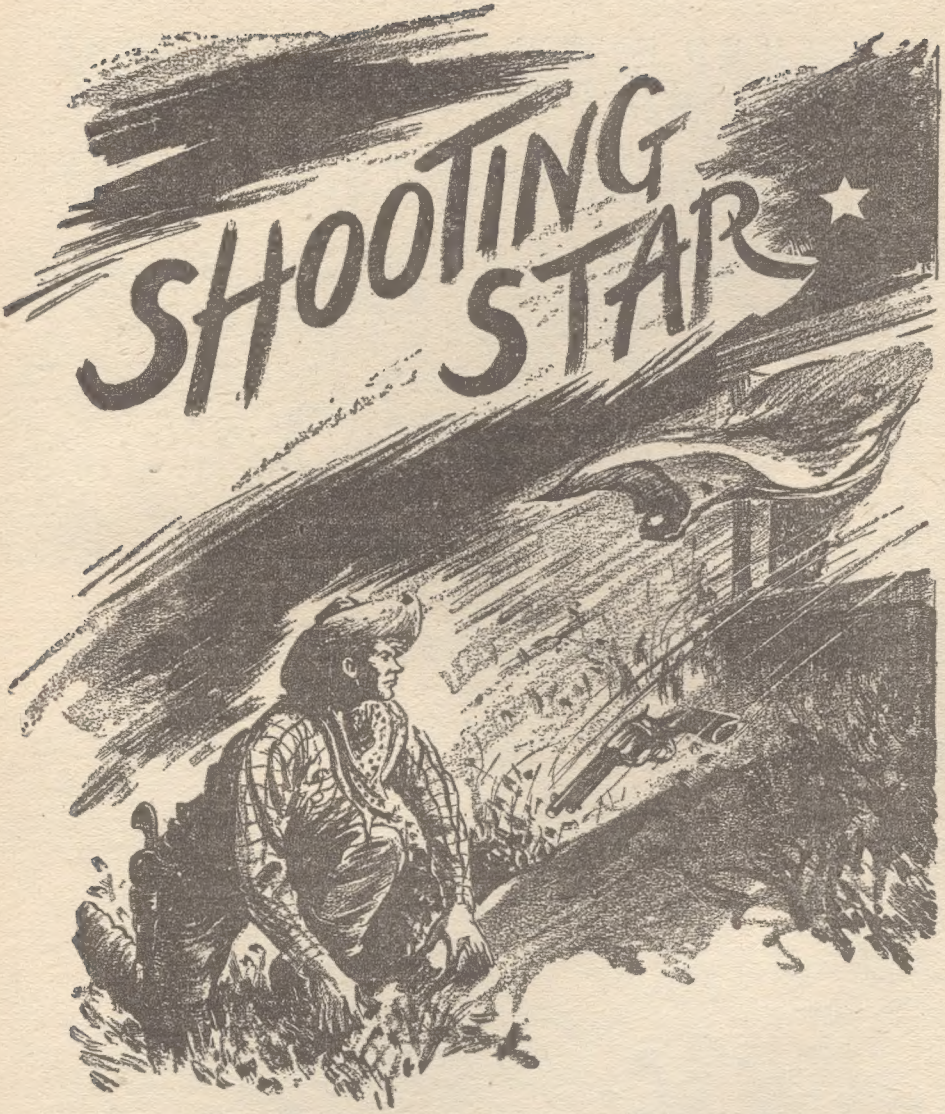

FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION OF THIS COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

By L. W. EMERSON

Chance Gilbert didn't believe the legend about the gun that fell into his hands one murderous night—he only knew it held some hidden importance. But even Chance didn't suspect its full sinister meaning . . .

CHAPTER I

Tumbleweed In Town

TALL AND lithe, Chance Gilbert stepped into El Castra's dusty street through the bat-wing doors of the Red Eagle and glanced about, puzzled. His roan pony had dragged its halter and was gone. Gilbert shrugged in disgust.

"Dang you, Walleye, you didn't want to go nowheres," he muttered. "If I'd dropped the reins in the dust you'd 've stood there all night....I dabbed 'em on the hitch-rail to step into a saloon—and you decided you'd fool me, you ornery crow-bait! You're hidin' out in the brush this minute."

The little desert country cow-town's homely buildings were sparse along the dusty thoroughfare. In the interstices olive mesquite brush grew down to the roadside on every hand. Darkness had long since fallen, with its remote stars. Above town the craggy Galiuro rimrock carved the sky; five miles away across the San Pedro valley the Santa Catalina range loomed vast and boundless. In this abyss of windy space the brush was only deeper, inky shadow stamped against the night.

Swearing under his breath, Gilbert plunged into the mesquite at the corner of the saloon and was instantly lost to sight and sound of the little

hamlet. The brush here was high, thick, and thorny; Chance was forced both to climb and crawl. Presently he became so entangled and confused that he stopped to cast about, all thought of Walleye forgotten for the moment. There above him, black against the heavens, hovered the serrated rimrock; directly opposite must lie the road. Gilbert was blocked in that direction, however, by the implacable mesquite. His exasperation growing, he worked to the right, following the faint intricate openings. Suddenly he stopped.

A gleam of light, filtering through the branches, had struck his eye. For an instant it blinded him; and when he moved he lost it. Then he found it again, perceiving now that it came from a carelessly screened window fifty or sixty feet away.

Confused and turned round as he was, Chance pondered what building this could be. There were shacks hidden in clearings in the brush, inhabited by Mexicans of frugal habit and numerous progeny, but this could not be one of those. Then, abruptly, he comprehended. At the rear of the Red Eagle, more or less of an inn and stage-station, were two or three makeshift additions, employed indifferently as bunkrooms or private gambling apartments—with emphasis on the last.

Gilbert had seen men drift unostentatiously through the bar toward the darkened depths of the place, bound for the poker tables over which high stakes were reputed to change hands; he had never entered the inner room and knew little of what went on there save by hearsay. This fact prompted his curiosity now. With silent circumspection he began to pick his way toward the telltale shaded window.

When he was within ten feet of the wall, and beginning to canvass his best prospects of an unobstructed view, the sound of loud voices raised in altercation halted him. It came from within the card-room. The window boasted no glass, a torn and tattered blanket having merely been hung over it—the harsh words would have been intelligible enough had there been one voice, or even two. But several angry cries mingled sharp and quick; and before Gilbert could make a move there came the muted crash of a gunshot, quickly followed by a second—and then the muffled, heavy thud of a falling body. Hasty and disconcerted movement sounded inside the room; a bang of chair and scrape of table. Men were crambling up and coming out. In the midst of the brief ensuing lull something struck the blanket hung over the window. It ripped dryly, letting out a golden flood of light, and a heavy object hurtled through to thump to the ground almost at Chance's feet.

GILBERT HAD crouched low at the sudden tearing of the blanket, wary of probing eyes within; instinctively he groped for the fallen object. It met his fingers, and with a slight shock he discovered it to be a gun. He identified it as a .45, solid and heavy of frame. The glow emanating from the window gleamed on its polished handle. Squatted there, the thing lying loose in his hand, a sudden furtiveness descended on Chance.

It crossed his mind in a flash that soon someone would come seeking the thrown gun, and he considered the advisability of lying in wait to learn who it might be—but only briefly. This was the last place in which, by accident or otherwise, he had any desire to be discovered; he began crawling away from the spot.

Muffled voices, increasing in number, could be heard back in the Red Eagle. Men called out in the dark street, and the clatter of hoofs sounded. Swift inquiry was going forward. Getting to his feet and turning toward the road, Chance had taken no more than a step or two when a nearby whisper of movement froze him in his tracks. Something was disturbing the thorny brush. He probed the gloom fruitlessly and his hand crept to his holster. To his dismay, his gun was gone. It must have fallen from the scabbard back there when the sudden tearing of the blanket had sent him pitching to his knees. The fact nonplussed him for a second, but no longer. The gun he had found had

been thrust inside his pantsband. He drew it and stood awaiting a repetition of the sound which had startled him.

It came again, closer than he expected; a long face thrust through the brush to snuff inquiringly. Chance expelled a deep breath. "Blast you Walleye, you're sure tryin' to work out on me!" he murmured disparagingly.

Walleye greeted him with a grunt of resigned recognition and submitted to capture without protest. Chance led him to the side of the road. A small crowd was beginning to gather down before the inn. With no one near at hand, Chance stepped out and sauntered down there, thrusting the gun into his holster.

BEFORE THE saloon was the usual milling crowd of hangers-on, mainly Mexicans, their dark faces carved with morbid curiou-ity; in the bar were gathered a score or more of booted and spurred men. Chance glimpsed Sheriff Hardwick and Solly Pool, the merchant; Durbin, who ran the Rimrock House, and one or two Galiuro ranchers. He pushed through and entered. Some of the men glanced at him but no one said anything. A circle was grouped before the bar, and here a more serious colloquy was in progress.

Three men stood apart: Bart Bromley, gnarled little Sammy Bodine, and a reckless, thin-faced kid puncher, Dave Cullers. Chance surmised at once that these were the men who had been in the card-room. Their features were sharp and alert and hunted in the yellow glow from the hanging kerosene lamp as Dane Hardwick confronted them. The lanky lawman, raw-boned, rugged and red of visage, was manifestly impatient.

"Let's get this straight," he rumbled. "Yuh say Cullers was sittin' opposite Wetherby—"

"An' Sime's back was to the winder," nodded Bromley—a huge, brawny individual, coarse and dark of face, whom men called Bully Bromley.

"Um," grumbled Hardwick. "An' that leaves you an' Sammy facin', with you on Wetherby's—"

"Left."

"Wal—and how'd youh know Sime was cheatin' his hand, as yuh say?"

"I seen it!" broke in Bodine in a cracked, shrill voice. "Wetherby dropped this extra card—"

"He *was* cheatin'," interjected young Cullers truculently. His fiery stare threw sparks of defiant challenge; his very pose was a brazen swagger. "I'd do the same over ag'in, Hardwick! Wetherby flashed this handful of aces—all but the spade. When he started to rake in the pot, I stopped him. The others backed me up, too. Sime didn't argue—he went for his gun—an' I give him his ace of spades, right between the eyes!"

Gilbert knew Wetherby, a big-framed, jovial bull-whacker of thirty. It came as a surprise, however, to hear that Sime had been caught cheating. Studying Cullers' heated, hawk-nosed face sharply, Chance asked himself if it could be true.

Sheriff Hardwick nodded unemotionally at the conclusion of Cullers' story. "Somebody said Sime shot too—"

"He did. It's in the wall, there by the ceilin'," piped Sammy Bodine. Excitement appeared to have lifted him out of aging senility; his pupils glowed and his whole spare, gnarled body vibrated.

"His gun's gone now."

"Shore. It went flyin' out the winder."

Hardwick peered sharply. "Out the window?" He appeared to scent some mystery here.

"Yeah. Sime didn't throw it—it kinda slithered out of his hand as he went over backward."

"Uh-huh. . . .Lemme see yore gun," Hardwick told Cullers. Dave sullenly handed it over. It was a heavy framed stock-model .38 of a common make. One cartridge had been discharged. Hardwick twirled the cylinder and handed it back.

"Sime looks as if he' been drilled with a .45," he said, and Chance Gilbert's pulse jumped.

Cullers fired up. "I can't help what it looks like," he threw out angrily.

"My gun'll make a sizable hole in any man's head!"

IF THIS bluster was a threat Hardwick ignored it, dropping the subject. There appeared to be something on his mind, but he did not express it. After a few more questions he waved a hairy hand.

"Reckon I won't hold yuh, Cullers. No more can be done till the coroner finishes with Wetherby. But don't make the mistake of leavin' town fer a day or two."

"Then yuh mean yuh are holdin' me?" The boy bristled aggressively. "Bromley an' Bodine here both back my story! I tell yuh it was self-defense!"

The sheriff eyed him levelly. "You will know it if I decide I wanta hold yuh," he rejoined bluntly.

Cullers appeared disappointed that no argument was forthcoming; he was the type who fed on dissension, but Dane's hard-headed firmness somehow deflated his egotism. Dane turned to Solly Pool.

"What's yore idee of this deal, Sol?" he queried.

The stout, bald, and serious merchant, a power in the valley, shook his head briefly. "I don't like the business, o' course," he said. "But there ain't anything you or anybody else can do—yet."

"Somebody better do somethin'," put in Dunk Pomerene, a black-browed rancher from the Winchesters. He glared disapprovingly over his prominent beaked nose at Dave Cullers. "We've always took care of our own troubles here in the valley. It'll go on that way!"

Cullers, young as he was, knew his way among men. He only smiled blandly at Dunk. "Sime Wetherby was some relation to yore foreman, wasn't he, Pomerene?" he queried slurringly.

"Shore! An' what of it?" old Dunk blazed back.

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all....Only I *thought* he smelled of sheep," was Dave's meaningful rejoinder. "Jest be shore yore boys keep their distance from me and there won't be no accidents."

"Hyar!" exclaimed Hardwick severely. "I won't have that kind of talk from either of yuh. Break it up, now!"

Pomerene made no effort to improve the situation, glowering at the trio before the bar with equal malevolence. Bart Bromley regarded him with heavy, almost stupid surprise; Sammy Bodine sputtered impotently. With the exception of the bartender he appeared the only man in the room who wore no gun, a circumstance which more than one of those present would have declared to be deceptive. A loafer of devious ways, there was something indefinably waspish about Bodine which, even while they ridiculed it, men were half inclined to heed. It was young Cullers who took the initiative. He turned his back on Pomerene and leaned a thin, nervous elbow on the bar.

Chance Gilbert delayed no longer, his interest waning now that official inquiry had descended to acrimonious bickering. Other spectators followed his example as he turned to leave.

Leading Walleye to Rawles' livery barn, Chance saw to the pony's care and then drifted back upstreet. He ran into several cowboy acquaintances as the evening wore on; and if he had little to say concerning the shooting affray at the Red Eagle, he listened attentively. No word did he hear regarding that which most interested him. At length he drifted to the Rimrock House and went to bed.

HE WAS up early, a habit common to men of the desert. A pearly blush suffused the sky as he strolled down the road. The rimrock loomed high and dark in the east; gray shadows still enfolded the mesquite. No one observed when he stepped into an opening and made his way cautiously toward the rear of the Red Eagle. Not a sound broke the spell of silence. He reached the open space beside the card-room, and found the spot where he had plunged to his knees the night before; but to his chagrin there was no sign of the six-gun he had dropped.

Making his way back to the road, Chance proceeded to the livery barn.

A long, worn bench ran along the front where in the heat of the day men congregated for talk. Nobody was there now. Chance sank on the polished boards to await the first curl of smoke from the chimney of Leeper's hash-house, his expression brooding as he thought of his lost gun. While there was nothing special about it, he had packed it for a number of years and was used to it as to an old glove; it had seen him through more than one tight spot. Someone had beaten him to it—and for the first time he began to perceive the possible importance of the gun which had come hurtling through the window to fall at his feet.

Drawing it from his holster, Gilbert looked it over. As he expected, one cartridge had been discharged. It bore polished bone butt-plates with the carved head of a girl on either side; but Chance looked in vain for any further identifying marks. He was turning it over for the last time before stuffing it away, when a shuffling step startled him. He shot a look.

Old Sammy Bodine stood there regarding him intently. Bodine's lined face was gray and taut; his eyes burned with a strange fire. Suddenly he sprang forward with clawed hands extended. The old man was shrunken and bent, but there was nothing infirm about him. Before Chance could make a move to conceal the bone-handled gun, Sammy snatched it from his grasp.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, his voice rising almost to a shriek as he clutched the gun to his chest. "The Grim Lady! My sweet one, my little beauty!" he crooned, exultant recognition ringing in his tone.

CHAPTER II

The Grim Lady

CHANCE GILBERT'S normal manner toward Sammy Bodine, as a shiftless habitue of the saloons, was one of good-humored tolerance. But in that moment he suffered a shock which told him the old man was not all he seemed.

"Hey! Easy, old boy!" he burst out. The stern set of his face was no longer altogether pleasant; for an instant he wondered whether Bodine could be wholly sane. The rapt look on that creased, bony visage and the strange senseless gibberish to which he gave voice bore the cast of something sinister. Uncertain of what course the old derelict's fancy might assume next, Gilbert rose off the bench in a rush and forcibly possessed himself of the gun before Sam could turn the business end of it in his direction.

"Just let me take care of that," he said matter-of-factly.

Bodine immediately displayed agitation and dismay. "Gimme it!" he shrilled. "It's my gun, Gilbert! I gotta have it—I gotta!"

"Yours?" Chance pretended not to understand. "If you're so shore of that, how'd you come to lose it?"

"I—lent it," Sammy faltered.

"Oh. Yuh lent it." Chance grunted. "And the feller was so careless he just dropped it, I suppose?"

"No, he—"

"He what?"

Bodine appeared overcome by confusion, his eyes doglike and desperate. "Honest, Chance, I—I just gotta have it back!" he pleaded earnestly, apparently sorry now that he had claimed the gun.

"And what am I gonna use?"

Sam caught at that hopefully. He fumbled in his clothes. "I got another gun yuh kin have." The words tumbled from his lips. "Here—swap with me, Gilbert." He drew forth a well-worn Colt's .45 and extended it.

Had Gilbert not held a close guard on himself his eyes would have bugged out at sight of the gun Bodine produced. For it was his own. Recognizing it by sundry marks and nicks on the cedar handle, he stared at it for a moment and appeared thinking, as indeed he was. Finally he shook his head.

"Not so fast," he grumbled. "I never knowed you to pack a gun before, let alone two. Don't know where yuh got so many from." Inwardly he was

digesting the fact that Bodine was the man who had sought to recover the gun flung through the window of the Red Eagle, only to find Chance's instead. It might mean something or it might not. "What is there about this bone-handled smoke wagon anyhow?" he pursued curiously.

"Wal—a man likes to carry his own gun," was the evasive answer.

"Shore. But what was it yuh called it again?" Chance pretended an effort to recall, his eyes on the brightening golden sky. Early sunshine flushed the Catalinas, but it would be an hour before the sun rose above the towering rimrock. "Grim somethin'—Lady, wasn't it?"

Bodine mumbled incomprehensibly and his wary eyes flickered and darted about. "It didn't mean nothin'," he got out at length. "Jest some dang foolishness of mine—"

Chance was watching him with a hard smile. Desperation welled afresh in the little man's rheumy eyes. "Yuh—yuh ain't aimin' to keep it?" he demanded huskily.

"I don't say that. But yo're tellin' me all about it. Yuh might's well begin talkin'. Sam."

BODINE STRUGGLED with himself. Then some decision won out. "It's cursed," he burst out hoarsely. "Honest to Gawd, Chance! It's got a curse on it! You don't wanta tote it—it's a bad medicine, I swear!"

"Shore," Gilbert humored him. "But this Grim Lady business—"

"That's what I call it." The words came with a rush at the last, and Bodine was panting. "The Grim Lady. My Steel Lady—my darling!.....I didn't want to tell yuh. You asked for it—an' it's gospel truth!"

Chance's unwavering eyes were like drills.

"Cursed, yuh say?"

"Yeah! I know it don't make sense, Chance, but I swear it's so!....The gun's got a turrible curse on it. Sooner or later, every man who carries it kills somebody! If he don't git shut of it then, he gits himself killed!.... Now are yuh willin' to swap guns with me?"

"Well, well!" murmured Chance, with raised brows. "Whoever'd have thought of such a thing?"

Bodine stared at him burningly. "Yuh don't believe a word of it, do yuh?"

"Not so fast," countered Chance. "I didn't say that. But it all takes me kind of sudden, for a fact. Tell me some more about it. Where'd yuh get the gun, Sam; and how'd the curse get on it?"

Strife ensued in Bodine's racked spirit. Clearly he was under great stress. There was in him mingled suspicion and fierce intent.

"Wal—reckon you've heard of Redfield," he muttered. Chance nodded incredulously. Redfield the Rustler was a figure who had played his grim part in the San Pedro country twenty years or more before, during the wild Indian days. His most notorious exploit had been the robbery of a bullion train on the river road, after which he and his gang had killed at least three men during the course of a flying gun battle up through Arivaipa Canyon, and then escaped into Sulphur Springs valley. His tale was told over the bars and in Mexican jacals to this day; but Redfield himself had not been heard of for years.

"Redfield gimme the Steel Lady," muttered Sam Bodine, in jerky accents. "*He* didn' need her no more. Warned me 'bout the curse—an' every word's been proved over an' over, Chance. Over an' over!" He broke off. "Gimme the gun, Chance, an' take this'n—there's a good feller! You don' wanta git into no trouble—"

Gazing at Bodine thoughtfully, Gilbert's rocky smile was visible once more. Hard-headed and far from a fool, he did not for a minute give credence to the reputed curse; this was merely Bodine's wily means of persuading him to hand over the gun, although with the innate superstition of an inveterate gambler, he would not have cared to commit himself. There *might* be something in it. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of Mexicans and Indians knew beyond doubt that strange things happened on the desert.

"What makes you so shore I'm

for dodgin' trouble?" Chance queried gently.

Bodine blanched. "Then yuh—are keepin' it?" he almost gulped.

The truth was, that was Gilbert's intent, if not for the reason he chose to allow Sammy to believe. In his mind the bone-handled .45 held a significance far different from that which Bodine imputed to it, perhaps in connection with the death—or murder—of Sime Wetherby. Just why Bodine sought so desperately to reclaim the gun was not apparent; but Chance wanted to find out.

"Yeah," he said easily. "I'm keepin' it, Sam. For now."

BODINE SHOOK his head wonderingly. A melancholy sadness crept into his voice. "Yo're all alike, Gilbert. Bound to barge into the worst kind of bad luck, even when yuh see it comin'!....I can't figger it out. But yuh will have it. Jest remember I told yuh how it would be," he concluded so lugubriously that Chance gave vent to a chuckle.

"I won't forget, Sam," he promised solemnly. "When they're interrin' the corpse I'll be sure to give full credit to old Betsy here—I mean the Steel Lady," he corrected himself gravely.

Sammy gave him a look of ferocity and indignation, turned on his heel and stomped away. Gilbert looked after him calculatingly. There were a number of questions he had intended to ask the old man; but some furtive quality in Sam's manner convinced him that undue curiosity would only serve to defeat its own purpose.

With newly aroused interest Chance drew forth the heavy gun and reexamined it. Though its signs of wear and its dull shine from much handling told of past care and use, he learned no more from it than before. He hefted it musingly. Regardless of his reason for keeping the gun, it must remain an efficient tool in the event of sudden need. Its weight varied little from that of his own, but the balance differed. As for its accuracy, that remained to be tested.

Gun in hand, Gilbert glanced in the direction of Leeper's restaurant. It was open now. A man emerged, slammed the cotton-covered screen and walked off, wiping his mustache. Putting the gun up, Chance sauntered down to his breakfast.

Rich sunshine, gilding the crest of the rimrock, was flushing the Santa Catalinas when he stepped into the street once more. It had been his plan to ride up the valley to the copper camp of Bonanza Belt today for a look around, but now there were things he wanted to do first, and Walleye remained in the stable long after noonday had come and gone. Chance sat on the porch of Pool's store, one leg dangling, taking inventory of the eight or ten silver dollars remaining in his pocket, when Dane Hardwick came out of his little office across the way. He spied Gilbert on the store porch and stepped over.

"Expectin' comp'ny out at the ranch?" he inquired casually.

Chance looked up. "Howdy, Dane. Not that I know of." For the past ten months he had ridden for Buck Vale's Dumbbell brand, on the north slope of the Catalinas—an arrangement which he had terminated in his easy way the previous day—but he did not speak of this. Hardwick respected his reticence, turning the talk to the shooting of Wetherby.

"I don't quite see through that business yet," Dane admitted. "Sime Wetherby wasn't the kind to deal in crooked cards. An' his gun disappearin'—"

"Disappearin'?" repeated Chance somewhat guardedly.

"Yeah. Wasn't able to find it out in the brush this mornin'—an' it ain't turned up since."

GILBERT WAS hard put to it to evince indifference, asking himself if the lawman had spotted the missing gun in his holster and was waiting for him to speak up. With customary boldness he decided to say nothing. "Kind of surprised me to hear old Sammy Bodine was in that game," he volunteered, watching Hardwick's eyes. They crinkled faintly.

"Oh, old Sam gits around. Quite a ranny in his day, I understand. The boys ask him to sit in when they

need a hand. Reckon they let him pick up a dollar or two that way."

It made sense, and told Chance that Hardwick saw no especial significance in the old derelict—unless Dane was deeper than he seemed. Gilbert's thoughts switched to another quarter.

"Expect there ain't too much money in that game in the back room," he hazarded. "Seems queer it should come to shootin' overwhat must've been on the table." The sheriff's bushy brows twitched upward.

'Wouldn't care to take a bet on that, would you?" he countered.

"Eh?" Chance said as if surprised.

"That room," continued Dane, "is where Kink Horan lost his ranch at cards last month—not in Tombstone, as rumored. I've seen five thou' in gold on that table at one time. Not often, no."

Gilbert stared, suddenly understanding the frequent trips to town of rich ranchers from the Winchesters and Rincons, and even Sulphur Springs valley. He had also learned what he wanted to know. A few more words with Hardwick and he strode down to the livery barn.

Ed Rawles paused in his work, looking up as Gilbert hauled his saddle into the gangway of the barn.

"Ed," said Chance cheerfully, "here is a real bargain comin' at yuh. Yuh may not know it, but you're goin' to buy this saddle for ten bucks."

Rawles grunted. "Yo're crazy! I don't want that battered old wreck."

Chance grinned, his good humor unimpaired. "For once we're agreed. You don't want it and I don't want to part with it—but you're buyin' it, all the same," he insisted.

THE LIVERYMAN scratched his pate, looking at the saddle. It was by no means a battered wreck, but an extremely serviceable, hand-carved hundred-and-sixty dollar hull, the horn only a little rope-burned. An excellent hand-made rifle boot was attached, from which Gilbert had removed his carbine. Rawles couldn't lose. At the same time it was never meant that he should gain, a fact of which he was perfectly aware. And he had tired of playing banker to half the improvident wranglers in the valley. Ed's weakness was that he was easy-going.

"Wal—" he gave in grudgingly. After some delay he handed over the ten dollars. "Hang yor hull in that stall there," he grumbled, and turned back to his work.

Chance's first stop after supper that evening was at the Red Eagle. There, while looking the crowd over, he treated friends handsomely and bought himself a choice cigar, and with it in his lips at a jaunty angle, stepped out on the stone-flagged front gallery. It had been a fine mellow day, with only a little dust on the fresh April breeze. In the effulgent afterglow the flanks of Mount Biglow looked startlingly dark and green.

A few freighters and cowboys lounged up and down the road. A homeward-bound rancher rattled out of town in a creaking buckboard. Chance heard the thunder and rumble of an ore-freight from Bonanza Belt, pulling into El Castra for the night. Interested in the ore freights, and always watching for them, he glanced up—and stood there frozen, cigar poised, his brows grown craggy over the keen gray eyes.

On the nigh wheeler of the long freight team rode a girl, young, upright, in bleached blue Levis and woolen shirt; such a forthright and level-eyed person as Gilbert had never seen. Her eyes were blue, her blowing hair golden, in marked contrast to the deep tan of face and throat and arms. He placed her age at not much over twenty. She sat the saddle like a cavalryman and handled the team like a veteran. Chance was guilty of his rudest stare as she rode past, serene and easy; he was still watching when she swung the long eight-hitch rig into Rawles' yard with masterful manipulation of the jerkline. Something had happened to him that rendered him oblivious to his surroundings. What had he been missing? His lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"What a gal!" he marveled inwardly, half in jest and half seriously.

"Holy smoke! This'll stand lookin' into."

CHAPTER III

Fool For Luck

AS HE STROLLED into the bar, there was a calm purposefulness in Gilbert and a casual assurance he seemed able to command at will. Several men nodded and spoke, but ignoring the obvious invitation to join them, he ranged up along-side Cash Darby, a silk-shirted and indolent familiar of the place.

"Howdy, Cash. Warmish today."

"Hello, Gilbert," Darby nodded. "Yeah—summer's on the way early."

They talked desultorily for a moment.

"Game on inside?" queried Chance finally.

Cash assented with interest. "Why not give it a whirl?"

"Reckon I will."

Chance pushed away from the bar and walked back toward the rear of the place. A door gave upon a gloom-cloaked hall down which could be heard the rattle of pots and pans. Near at hand was discernible a closed door round the edges of which showed threads of light.

Grasping the catch, Chance pushed the door open and stepped in.

It was a small room, lit by a smudged tin lantern. A heavy wave of mingled tobacco smoke and liquor struck Chance. He scanned sharply the seven or eight men seated at the table. As he had anticipated, one of them proved to be Sammy Bodine, dark, wrinkled and leathery under the yellow glow. A new game was just starting and some shuffling of seats was going on. Gilbert moved over to stand at Bodine's side as if waiting.

The little man looked up uneasily. "Want this seat, don't yuh!" he muttered.

Chance did not speak.

"Take somebody else's," jerked out Sam querulously. "You'll have t' wait."

Chance obdurately waited. Bodine shuffled and fidgeted nervously. Suddenly he jumped up with an oath. "Okay, dang it! Have it yore own way!" With snorts of wrath he stumped from the room.

Others laughed lazily over the byplay as Gilbert sat down. Evidently it was no new thing for Sammy Bodine to be treated with scant ceremony at times in this place. While the cards were being dealt, Chance glanced around. His eye took in the position of the blanketed window. Then he searched the wall for the mark made by Sime Wetherby's badly aimed bullet. In place of one, however, there were half a dozen bullet holes visible; guns had been discharged there frequently. There was little to be learned in that direction. Chance shrugged and turned his attention to the cards, his eight or nine dollars before him on the table.

PERHAPS NO other game could have attained the same popularity as poker in that rough land, for it called to all the wit and sagacity in a man. Chance Gilbert had not won his nickname by accident. A byword in the bunkhouses across the range, he knew most of these men here tonight: a hay contractor, a teamster, two copper men up from Benson; Dunk Pomerene, the range baron, with another rancher; Jeff Lingle, Hardwick's deputy, and others. And they soon grew acquainted with him. For Chance played an inspired hand. Steadily the pile of chips before him swelled to a heap, then a mound. He might have been driven by unswerving purpose, so uniform was his luck. Once or twice Dunk Pomerene grew angry and plunged; he was trying to overwhelm and break Gilbert's run of luck by superior weight of capital. It did him no good. When Chance rose at last from the table he was the winner by close upon fourteen hundred dollars. No one cried out for vengeance. They were relieved to see him go. Moreover, Gilbert was barely in time to catch Ed Rawles at the livery barn.

"Much obliged for the loan, Ed,"

he sang out, flipping the liveryman a double eagle. "Just let the saddle hang."

Rawles pocketed the gold-piece with a penetrating look and a grunt. Chance's expansive manner told him all that he needed to know; but Ed, slim and wiry and grizzled, remained unmoved. He had never had any faith in money gained over the poker table.

Relieved of his obligation, Chance turned back down the road for a breath of air. Having abstained all evening, he craved a drink as well. He was heading back for the Red Eagle bar when a voice hailed him out of the shadows before the Coronado dance-hall.

"Fer cripes' sake," it said. "Is that you, Chance?"

It was Ash Salmon, a fiery red-headed puncher for Despard's Gourd outfit in the Galiuros. Mitch Morrel and Ollie Witten, his *companeros,* were with him. They pushed close to Gilbert, elbowing each other, breathless.

"Come on with us, Gil," Morrel proposed. "We'll sashay in the Coronado here an' stir up some fun—"

Change looked them over and grinned. "Reckon you're sober—an' wishin' you weren't," he opined, and glanced toward the dance-hall. "Why not pick out a nice quiet denful of wildcats an' be done with it?"

The hall, a rambling low adobe structure, was patronized chiefly by Mexicans. Mescal and tequila, potent native concoctions, were the drinks dispensed there. The music was primitive, with a strong appeal to Iberian passions. Knives flashed and shots rang out in the place with disconcerting regularity. Since rarely anyone but a *pelado* or two was hurt, little attention was paid to this. Occasionally an American strayed in—and saw strange sights.

"Come ahn," urged Ash Salmon, facetiously nasal. "We don't git to taown very often, by cracky!"

Chance hesitated a moment, his grin persisting, and nodded, "My luck is in tonight. Maybe I'll live."

THEY LOUNGED into the place to find it over-crowded and busy, the air heavy. Mexican woodchoppers, herders, and two or three dandies, redolent of sweat and dirt and perfume mingled, danced with dumpy, skinny, gaudy, sloe-eyed girls, a graceful beauty here and there standing out. There was a silent Indian standing near the door, black-eyed, inscrutable, and motionless. Colorful *rebozos,* scarves, sashes were much in evidence.

The four had their drinks, gazing about them. Soon Ash was whirling enthusiastically with a dusky *mestiza.* Her swain, a villainous-looking *pelado,* glared furiously at Salmon and stalked out. Ten minutes later Mitch Morrel gave a grunt, frowning. Following his glance, Gilbert observed Dave Cullers, the rash young cowboy killer, stepping cockily into the Coronado, ignoring the American completely. Cullers appeared well-known here. In a few minutes he was whirling a red-lipped siren to the liquid Spanish measures.

These girls followed Dave like a magnet with their eyes; but manifestly he struck sparks as well. Suddenly, a stocky Mexican with whom he carelessly collided turned and swung at him, ripping out a mouth-filling curse. Dave ducked and struck back like a snake. In an instant a brawl was in full progress. Chance and his friends followed it alertly. They were not disturbed when a number of Mexicans, girls and men, closed in about them, milling. But evidently the presence of Americans was resented tonight. Without warning a heavy-jawed *mestizo* jammed an elbow into Gilbert's stomach and then lunged at him. Chance's whiplash uppercut flung him back. With a snarl several others crowded close, despite Mitch and Ollie's attempts to thrust them away. The air was full of fists. A bottle sailed through the air.

In the crush a sinuous hand snatched at Gilbert's gun-belt. The quick fingers brushed the bone-handled Colt. Chance slapped them away; his vicious short-arm jolt dropped their owner in his tracks. A clamorous outcry was raised; a knife-

blade glittered before Chance's eyes.

"We better haul outa this!" exclaimed Ollie warningly. Chance turned.

At that moment another bottle sailed through the air to strike Mitch, laying open a wide gash in his head. Giving vent to an aroused roar, he charged into the crowd, from which the women had miraculously melted. Chance, Ash and Ollie were at his side. Left and right they swung. Heads were broken, eyes closed. With a thunderous yell the Mexicans attempted to mob the four; but, flung this way and that, tumbled, rolling, they never got started. With a crash one of the hanging lamps blinked out. The tide turned in a twinkling. Mexicans poured from the hall through every opening. Grabbing the man he was certain had tried to purloin his gun, Gilbert angrily flung him through a window, taking glass and sash with him.

Murky peace descended abruptly, leaving the four in sole possession of the place. Dave Cullers appeared to have faded in thin air. They tied up the cut in Mitch's head, routed out a last round of drinks, and left.

"Short an' sweet," jested Salmon, with a grim laugh. To him the whole episode was only a lark. Chance nodded, but his thoughts were busy. More than one incident there in the Coronado had aroused his suspicions. There was always the chance that the roughs had been after the money he still carried on him, but he chose to believe otherwise.

"If that rough-house was organized for the purpose of stealin' this gun I'm totin'," he reflected, "somebody must be wantin' it gosh-awful bad. Somebody besides Sam Bodine.... But who?"

No matter what the answer, he had assuredly played in luck tonight against heavy odds.

HIS FRIENDS took leave of him swinging astride their ponies to ride out to the ranch. He did not miss them. Walking up the dark road, aware of the sleepy twitter of a night bird somewhere out in the brush, Chance watched a brilliant meteor flash across the heavens and die out in a trail of sparks. Shooting star—that was he, if he didn't haul up short. A man had to fasten to a firmer, safer star if he hoped to get anywhere in the tough desert world. No more long chances—no more carousing such as his friends had led him into there in the Coronado.

"Piece of damned foolishness," he thought disgustedly. "No telling what kind of story'll be spreadin' round town tomorrow."

Just why the thought suddenly troubled him he could not have put into words. A week ago he would not have cared a whit. It was no longer true. Gilbert did not bother to analyze the change; but climbing the stairs to his room at the Rimrock House, he fell to contrasting his past life with the strangely different one of the girl whom he had seen that evening, driving the freight outfit.

Despite his busy night he had not forgotten her; nor, now that he noticed this, did he expect to. Memory of her cool composure exerted a strange allure for him. She was the kind of girl, he recognized instinctively, for whose good opinion a man would fight.

Observation had apprised him of the hour at which freight outfits, overnighting on their two-day trip up and down the valley, started out in the morning. Early as it was, the following day Chance turned up at Rawles' barns half an hour before. It was Sunday. The fact made little difference in El Castra. The night man blinked at Chance stupidly as he began saddling up Walleye, meticulously and taking a good deal of time about it; but the fellow said nothing.

Gilbert heard the girl arrive. For some minutes he went on fussing with the roan's cinch in the half-dark of the place. Finally, curiosity getting the better of him, he maneuvered Walleye out into the yard. The girl had the log-chain she used as a hook-up laid out and was backing the heavy teams into position as Rawles' man walked them out. She was familiar and even expert with the harness. Chance watched the golden lantern light catch in the glossy web of her

blonde hair and mold her firm, trim arms and shoulders as she worked. Her face was at peace, white, even a little sleepy, but her movements were brisk and efficient. If she was conscious of him watching she gave no indication of it.

WONDERING WHERE her swamper might be, Gilbert stood looking over the massive, sleek draught teams. He ought to recognize the outfit by its horses, he knew, and so place her; but though the animals appeared familiar, in this instance they lent no aid. Accustomed as the girl was to heavy work, the task of driving the heavy teams struck Chance as being almost too much for a person of her size and weight. The great wheelers, a splendid span of matched bays, would have frightened the average woman; yet she knew her work so thoroughly as to offer no opening for a man, however willing he might be to lend assistance.

Chance squatted a moment on his heels as if to pick up a fallen romal, and when he straightened there were several small pebbles in his fingers. He flipped one with his thumb and it struck the near wheeler on the flank. The huge bay flinched and sidled uneasily, tossing its head.

"Whoa, Kate!" called the girl soothingly, as she worked.

A second missile caused the horse to twitch and kick at her stomach with upraised hind hoof; a third set her stamping and snorting. The girl vented an exclamation of impatience. A moment later she came forward quickly, the lantern outlining her slim Levi-clad form. Gilbert stepped out to grasp the big wheeler's bridle.

"Easy, old girl, easy!" he soothed, petting her with knowing hands. Watching him, the girl stopped a few feet away. Did he only imagine her back to be straighter?

She said, "What's wrong?"

"She's kind of skittish," Chance muttered. "It's my guess somethin's botherin' her."

The bay was over her fright and perfectly placid once more; but Gilbert went over the harness, pretending to search for whatever had caused the disturbance. At last he straightened and turned, conscious of the girl still standing there, her grave glance following his every move.

"Can't find a thing," he confessed, with a lame smile.

"Thanks. Now perhaps if you stop shying stones, Kate will stop her kicking," the girl amazed him by suggesting in a voice more than slightly impatient.

"Why—" Gilbert deprecated in dismay. For an instant he believed she *had* seen what he was doing. "I won't go to be as ornery as that ...."

She laughed shortly. "So I was right." She was still shrewdly guessing. Slow seconds dragged past, during which she observed his discomfiture and savored his voluble disclaimers. "Very well," she broke in brusquely. "You didn't do it— and you won't do it again. It's just as well, because I'm in a hurry."

Chance had a grip on himself once more. He had certainly not expected to be thrown off balance so completely and knew he had managed the business badly.

"Sure. I'll help yuh get started," he said readily as she turned away.

But at that ill-fated moment her swamper put in an appearance Chance had noticed him the night before—a strapping young fellow with straw-colored hair and a broad face which looked as if it gave itself easily to ill-humor. But he was no fool. He strode forward, curious, looked Gilbert over deliberately, and then checked the hook-up of the teams.

"Okay, Molly," he called out. "We're ready to roll!"

Chance silently stepped back. The swamper and the girl called Molly took their places. Plainly she was no mean hand with the blacksnake. The whip-lash cracked sharply; with a lumbering rumble the freight outfit pulled out of the yard.

A thin smile touched Chance Gilbert's mouth as the high trail-wagon disappeared past the corner of the barn. "Tempered and honed fine," he muttered to himself admiringly. "She sure took my measure in a hurry— Well! She'll remember me anyhow."

CHAPTER IV

The Rawhide Whip

ED RAWLES came slouching down the road as Gilbert led Walleye out through the barn. A tall, bald-headed man, he appeared always busy. He paused absently to glance in the direction in which Chance was looking. The girl's freight outfit was rumbling out of town in the spreading dawn, bound north to Bonanza Belt for loading at the copper mines.

"She sure can handle that rig," observed Chance.

"Yeah," Rawles agreed. "She fills Cliffs boots all right."

Gilbert looked at him with raised brows of inquiry. "Not Cliff Mulroy?" It occurred to him that the well-known teamster had lately passed away. Rawles nodded.

"That's Cliff's girl, Molly. Bound to stick to the business, fer some reason. It won't work out," he said gloomily.

Rawles had been a desert freighter in the years before he had opened his livery barn, with a name that was still remembered in the Salt River valley. He should know. Yet for some reason his prediction did not strike Gilbert agreeable.

"Tough country for a girl to be runnin' a freight rig....Who is that with her—it ain't Mulroy's old swamper?"

Rawles shook his head.

"No. Cliff's man quit. Thought he'd git the business, I reckon. This boy's name is Henriks—Gust Henriks, a Rail puncher who's been sparkin' Molly—not that he stands a chance. But he seems sharp an' tough."

"Mm . . . Swede?"

"Dane, I think." Rawles looked at Chance slowly. "You interested, Gilbert?"

Chance glanced away as if he had not heard. It was none of this man's business if he was. But Rawles understood his silence well enough.

"Because I am," said the liveryman cooly. "Just don't make no mistakes, boy." He turned away abruptly. Watching him go, Chance grinned wryly and as quickly sobered.

"She's got friends," he murmured, by no means displeased. It told him something about her which he could have learned in no other way. As for Gust Henriks, he did not give the man a second thought.

Leeper was just opening his restaurant when Gilbert drew up the blue roan and swung down before the door. Club-footed, greasy, and growing stout; a lock of hair hung down his forehead almost to his nose.

"You dang early risers gimme a pain," he grunted as Chance followed him inside and sank on a stool, Chance grinned.

"What kind of talk is that for an old round-up *cocinero?*" he retorted. "No more rain an' hail an' sleet, no more wet blankets; no more six-course meals out of the flour-sack and the sorghum jug—"

"An' no more steady pay neither," snarled Leeper, in a savage mood. "I hafta depend on what I kin squeeze outa you barroom buckaroos!"

"Shore," drawled Chance. "I'm good for a cup of Java. Throw some in the pan and warm it over."

But he took his time over his breakfast. Nothing could dampen his spirits this morning. The sun was rimming Galiuro Peak with gold when he swung aboard Walleye once more and headed north down the valley.

THE TRAIL followed the river bottoms, twining along past rocks and in more than one spot fording the shallow San Pedro. In rich hollows the mesquites grew up into high, tangled trees. Giant cacti stood on an occasional limestone shoulder. The balmy air was fresh, dry, biting. Gilbert rode at a leisurely pace. After a time a golden sheen struck the atmosphere and the sun rose above the rimrock.

Two gnarled Mexican woodcutters, with their burros, branched off into a canon. Chance met Will Boles, a two-bit rancher, amongst the scrub oaks on Oracle Hill, and rode with him for

an hour. The Benson stage passed, rumbling up the valley. After that the sun-baked trail seemed deserted. He knew Molly Mulroy was ahead of him, but for a long time did not glimpse her outfit.

Chance was jogging through a frosty-looking cholla forest, the cactus fairly bristling with crooked, deadly spines, when a sound jerked him stiffly erect. It was a rifle shot, its hollow, ringing spang unmistakable. It came from somewhere on ahead. Gilbert conned that sound for a second, eyes grim, then kneed Walleye into a quickening trot, and soon reached a hump over which the trail wound. Beyond, it looped down the slow slopes between flanking greasewood. A half-mile to the fore the high box wagons of Molly Mulroy's ore team were halted opposite a rocky hogback ridge paralleling the trail.

For a moment Chance saw nothing more. Then the girl rounded the rear wagon and stood gazing up at the rocks. Chance saw Henriks atop one of the wagons. He had a rifle which he threw to his shoulder. A belated crack echoed along the rocks, It was not the same sound Gilbert had heard before; and that fact told the whole story. Someone in the rocks had taken a pot-shot at the freighter outfit and the girl and her swamper were bent on driving him off.

Chance's first reaction, after his grunt of astonished comprehension, was one of swift anger. His eye ran along the rock-jumbled ridge. The ridge joined with this rise on which he sat his horse; beyond lay a granite arroyo rising to weathered rims. With tightening rein, Chance turned the roan and began to pick his way through the brush. It lay thick but scattering; soon he could see little at a distance of ten feet; but finally the land fell away. He hauled over to avoid the brink of the arroyo. A wild jumble of riven granite lay down there, scattered over with sotol, giant cactus, and stunted greasewood. Lizards scampered away at the rattle of stones. Chance ran his gaze sharply along the depression. The sun dulled the gray and yellow rock until they merged in one endless unshadowed maze of deceptive distances. Finally he caught a furtive movement. Seeking a passage none too cautiously, Chance put his mount to the descent.

Five minutes saw him to the bottom. The arroyo floor proved a graveled gully interspersed with expanses of bare, water-worn rock. He pushed Walleye forward with more haste than circumspection; once the roan almost sat down on its haunches. Gun in hand, Chance was too busy scanning the rocks to watch the footing closely. But he saw no skulking bushwhacker clambering away. Coming to the point where the wash broke through the hog-back ridge, he pulled up. Had he missed the girl's attacker completely? Neither rock nor gravel nor claybank showed any betraying marks of flight. There appeared little use of further pursuit.

SHAKING HIS HEAD, Chance jogged out through the gap toward the trail, which crossed the dry creek near at hand, and was just in time to confront Molly Mulroy, advancing resolutely up the dry bed, six gun in hand.

She stopped, arrested, to stare at him with burning eyes. "You again!" she burst out hotly. "Is this your idea of sport?"

"Huh?" Gilbert was momentarily flustered.

"First you flip stones at Kate, my wheeler; than you decide to shoot her—and do it!" Her glance slid to the rifle stock protruding from his saddle-boot with accusing directness.

Chance's headshake was curt. "Not me, ma'am. I didn't do it—if that's what happened."

"Of course not! It couldn't have been you," she agreed angrily. "You didn't follow me out here from town either, I don't suppose."

"Look," he said, jaws reddening. "If I'd done a low-down caper like that—would I come ridin' out into lead the next minute?"

There had been one small, lingering doubt in her mind from the in-

stant she laid eyes on him; a doubt she was earnestly striving to overcome.

"A gambler might figure it just that way," she retorted scornfully.

While conceding her shrewdness, Gilbert knew a perverse and fleeting gratification as well. Somehow she had found a means of asking questions concerning him. She must have, if she knew that much about him; and what she had got for her pains was no more than she deserved. The fact emboldened him.

"Damn it all," he blazed out. "Why'd I bother to bark up my bronc's legs huntin' for your bushwhacker? ....I was ridin' down the road when I heard the shots," he elucidated cooly, "and cut over behind the ridge to grab the buzzard as he was sneakin' off. I don't ask for thanks—but I can't say a kick in the shins'll do as well!"

She had the grace to redden, however angrily.

"I don't believe a word of it! Probably your accomplice shot the horse —and you've come for a look at his work!"

Behind her stubborn courage lay a desperate hopelessness; nothing else could have driven her to such extravagance of speech. Guessing something of this, Chance felt unexpectedly sorry for her. But he knew better than to show it. They had turned back as they talked, the girl lowering her gun; they reached the trail as she finished, her expression set and dogged. The stalled freight outfit stood a dozen yards off, and one of the big wheelers was down in the harness. Molly's swamper whirled from his inspection of the horse in time to hear her impassioned utterance. Getting a flash of Gilbert, he lunged forward on the run.

Chance saw him coming. Henriks had no belt gun visible; but he had fully as dangerous a weapon for he had picked up Molly's blacksnake. It streaked through the air, curling over his head as he advanced.

"Gust!" cried Molly, fearful of further gun-play. He never heard her, all his attention riveted on Gilbert.

"Stop!"

THE EXCLAMATION was torn from Chance's throat; he was fearful of the writhing whip striking Walleye. It did not occur to him to worry about himself. A glance told him Henriks could not be stopped. The husky swamper threw back his arm in preparation for a blow. Before he could deliver it Chance kicked the roan to his side. Leaning over, he made a grab for the blacksnake's stock. Henriks bellowed fiercely. He guessed Gilbert's intention. As he whirled, half turning, to tear the whip from Chance's reaching fingers, the latter's arm encircled his neck and his elbow closed on the swamper's windpipe. Chance leaned back then. In an instant he dragged Henriks, red-faced and strangling, backward over the saddlebow.

Molly gave vent to a scream, fearing spilled blood if not worse; and Chance shot her a chilled steel glance.

"Shut up!" he barked, over Henriks's unbridled, hoarse bellowing. "Get around here and take this whip —if you want your swamper!" With hands full in his effort to keep the big fellow at a disadvantage while Walleye snorted and sidled in circles, he still could not reach the bullwhip.

Molly heard. She darted forward into the whirling dust. Like a small intent chaparral cook, she seemed absolutely fearless as she strove to grasp the whip. At last she had it, wrenching the stock from Gust's frantic grip.

As soon as she stepped back, Gilbert released his hold on the swamper. Henriks sprawled in the trail, and Chance pulled the roan aside. "Suppose you get a grip on yourself," he coldly told the choking, chagrined man in the dust. Henriks scrambled up and stood with arms hanging, spent for the moment.

"Very pretty," Molly bit out caustically. "And so competent!" Clearly she did not intend to accord Gilbert any credit for his summary handling of the difficult situation, though it was plain his actions left her puzzled. "Since you had nothing to do

with this shooting—and since you're not any too welcome here just at the moment—how will it be if you just turn your horse and jog on your way, cowboy?"

Behind the mocking light in Gilbert's eyes was prodigal admiration. She had spunk, this kid. In the midst of a serious dilemma, when she obviously needed aid, she meant to concede nothing. It was as though flint and steel had struck sparks between them at first glimpse, and antagonism could only strengthen with association. But possessing a debonair impudence of his own, Chance did not greatly mind. It was this heritage of spirited independence which had attracted him to the girl.

"Okay, Molly." Letting her see that he had also learned something about her was not beneath him. "Just one thing more....If you don't happen to know who *is* interested in puttin' your horses in the discard, and why, I'd take steps to find out. It might be interestin'."

SOMETHING in his tone spurred her to sudden fury. "Damn your insolence!" she exclaimed. He saw the scarlet flush brush across her white face. Before he knew what she meant, she whirled her arm back and the bullwhip snaked out. Not for nothing had she practiced for hours on the brush with that deadly weapon. Its lashing tip curled accurately round his head, raising a livid welt across his cheek-bones and the high bridge of his nose. Astounded, Gilbert sat absolutely still. A flash of fire crashed through him like an explosion; a fit of inward trembling seized his frame. But of this he showed no trace on the surface. He watched her arm haul back a second time—and then, suddenly, Molly threw down the blacksnake and covered her face with her hands. It was crimson where the fair skin showed between her fingers.

"Go!" she gasped. "Go—before I shame myself further!"

Flicking Henriks with a sardonic, watchful glance, Gilbert kneed Walleye round and rode up the trail toward Bonanza Belt.

"Cross my road again and I'll bust you in two!" Henriks howled after him hotly. Chance did not vouchsafe him the dubious comfort of a retort. Riding on, he turned a bend in the trail and the wall of olive-green mesquite hid Henriks, Molly Mulroy, and the stalled freight outfit from sight. Not yet did Chance know that his whole outlook on life was to be drastically changed by what had happened back there in a few minutes.

CHAPTER V

Wolf Sign

RICH, FAMOUS and well-established, the copper camp of Bonanza Belt extended for miles over a region of barren, rounded hills scarred by prospect holes and waste dumps, their predominant color a dull red. Scattered about the slopes were clumsy-looking buildings constructed mainly of rust-stained sheet iron; derricks, hoists, water-tanks, and narrow-gauge handcar tracks circling the hills or extending from tunnels to the great dump of low grade ore and limestone waste looming like some unnatural and monstrous excrescence above the two or three main streets of the camp.

At this point the Gila River swung in a great curve round the camp between towering canon walls. Flowing north from the Mexican border, the San Pedro emptied into the larger stream at the apex of the bight. A rattling plank bridge gave access from the south-running valley into Bonanza Belt's main street. The stores, restaurants, saloons and various business structures seemed to lie in the shadow of the hills for the biggest part of the day; but sunny crags or golden red slopes were always visible.

Time was when the camp had produced in greater volume than at present. When it was discovered during the latter days of the Indian troubles, the ore had been inaccessible. The coming of the Southern Pacific, in the early '80's, had

changed that. A trail had been carved out up the San Pedro valley over which a two-day haul put the ore on the railroad siding at Benson; the camp experienced a boom. Like many another it died down with time, but a second boom seemed likely. With the discovery of larger ore bodies, and even silver deposits in the district, the Arizona Eastern had begun to drive a long branch north from Bowie and down the Gila canon to Globe, of which a spur, in a matter of weeks, would put Bonanza Belt on the steel.

It would spell the end of freighting in the valley; a fact which had not escaped Gilbert, but on the contrary had set him thinking. He did not attempt to conceal from himself the astonishing truth. After years of large indifference to his own best prospects the zest of punching cows and riding the wild ranges, carousing among the camps and towns, was no longer enough. The first sight of Molly Mulroy not only had given him a deep, unaccustomed thrill, but filled him with imponderable restless ambitions as well. Strangely enough, the episode of the bull-whip had only intensified his determination. During his long ride down the valley this had slowly solidified into a plan of action.

AFTER a look at the camp and a drink to cut the dust, on the afternoon of his arrival, Chance presented himself at the pine-board field office of the Black Prince mine, where he asked for the resident manager. Robshaw, he was told, was at the main office in town. Back he rode, to climb the stairs to the second story over a surveyor's establishment, where a bald and bored clerk told him the manager was in conference with railroad men, and unavailable. Shrugging, Gilbert returned to the street and found a stable for Walleye. Hiring a room at the San Carlos Hotel, he spent the remainder of the afternoon in a chair on the porch, a speculative look in his eyes.

He was still there when, late in the day, with the sun splashing the cliffs down-river with mellow red, Molly's freight outfit rolled into town. Past the hotel she rumbled, straddling the wheel-horse erect and serene, apparently without observing Chance at all. He sat unmoving save for his virile head, which turned slowly as she passed by. A stalwart mule had taken the place of the wheeler that had been shot. Down the block a man called to Molly, who waved back in friendly fashion. Then she was gone. Gilbert sat on with carven lips, but his eyes were bright.

After supper Chance accosted a man in the hotel bar. "Did I hear Charlie here call you Robshaw?" he asked, indicating the bartender. The square-set, black-browed young man in field dress and knee-boots nodded shortly, his appraising glance lingering on the swelling red welt across Chance's lean cheeks.

"That's right."

Chance introduced himself. "I've been lookin' for you. Got a minute?"

"What is it, Gilbert?"

Chance motioned for drinks. "It's common knowledge the railroad will considerably change the picture here in the Belt. But the Arizona Eastern won't solve all your problems, Robsaw. The Prince'll still have a lot of work for wagons. I want to talk over an agreement to do your teamin'."

Robshaw turned his glass in his fingers for a moment. "I see." He looked up. "What put this in your head, Gilbert? Puncher is written all over you."

Chance grinned. "I thought you'd ask that. I've punched cows for a number years, but I'm gettin' out. I know the freightin' game. My old man was a teamster for Kearny. I was born in a wagon-bed—not one of these," he nodded toward a battered, high-sided ore wagon in the yard outside the window; "but a Santa Fe rig. Reckon I could say teamin' was in my blood."

"Hm." Robshaw pondered inscrutably, fingernails drumming. He said dryly: "Whatever your present plans, you're just a leather-burner to me. How am I to know whether you mean business?"

Chance said as dryly: "Soon or late, you're goin' to have trouble

keepin' your teamin' out of my hands."

Robshaw jerked a brisk nod of approval. "Very well. We'll talk it over ....I've a matter in hand that will keep me busy tonight, and possibly tomorrow morning. Drop into my office later in the day. Glad to've met you, Gilbert." He shook hands and swung on his heel.

On the strength of this talk Chance treated himself to another drink. The Black Prince was the biggest mine in the area, and he was well satisfied.

NEXT morning he called on Nate MacAloney, who ran the Copper King—bent and spare, with thinning gray hair, a crabbed, acid-tongued man, keen as a whip. Nate's answer to Gilbert's proposal was an ill-natured growl.

"Won't have no teamin' to give yuh,' he said sourly. "What little we'll have after the rails come I've already arranged for."

Chance's brows lifted. "I see. Mind tellin' me who'll get it?"

"Wal—if it's yore affair, it's goin' to Cliff Mulroy's girl, Gilbert. I may's well say she'll get all the rest of the camp's work too, if I know anything.

Chance nodded. "Nothin' wrong with that," he said pleasantly, I don't suppose there's any way of changin' your mind Nate?"

"None that I kin see from here," was the curt response.

"And I suppose Packer, over at the Old Bonanza, feels the same as you do about it—"

MacAloney looked sharply over the tops of his glasses. "Yes, he does. What inference d'you draw from that, young man?"

"Why—that you aim to look after the little lady, I reckon," answered Chance amiably.

Nate voiced no denial, and for Gilbert this closed the conversation, for he was satisfied that no monetary consideration would move the man. However, he did not lose the hope of winning over Robshaw. He was at the Black Prince office that noon before Robshaw appeared and was forced to wait. When the mining man arrived he asked Gilbert's plan in detail and pondered it long, apparently reluctant to come to a decision.

"Gilbert, this is the size of it," he said at length. "I'm not questioning your good faith; but I like to deal with a big outfit. The percentage of results is more certain....If you're planning to handle the teaming for the entire camp, we can talk business. Otherwise—" He broke off, his glance sharpening.

"Funny, your mentionin' that." Chance nodded boldly, keeping to himself the outcome of his talk with Nate MacAloney. "It's exactly what I am figurin' on."

Robshaw's eyes glinted. They talked on for an hour; and when they parted an understanding had been arrived at with which Gilbert professed himself content. The Black Prince's teaming, at least, was his; only the contract remained to be signed. But descending the stairs, Chance gave free rein to speculation.

"Robshaw's got some object in view that he ain't talkin' about," he mused soberly. "So he deals only with big outfits?....I believe he *wants* to make sure I'll control the camp's teamin', and that's okay. But what's his game?"

THE DEVELOPMENT was the less welcome because, to his astute mind, it appeared to presage trouble eventually; moreover, it offered indisputable evidence that Robshaw possessed a devious streak. Chance rolled it over with a deliberation new to him. "Robshaw's a cunnin' wolf," was his conclusion. "It ain't me—or the idea of dealin' with a big outfit—that matters to him. The man knows MacAloney's out to look after Molly; and he's double-crossin' the game. Likely they're buckin' each other in business—but that's not all of it either. Molly herself fits into this somewheres. What's Robshaw got against her? .... What's he after?"

It worried him that he could find no hint of the answer. His shrewd conjecture that participation in this business might land him between the

relentless millstones of a larger fight, however, left him unmoved. He was committed to his course for reasons as important as any Robshaw could possibly have. He would go on.

Out of his knowledge of the man Gilbert drew the hunch that Packer, of the Old Bonanza, might be worth approaching, and he went over there. Packer, it turned out, was somewhere in the hills for a day or two. Chance found himself at loose ends. He made the best of his morning by calling on various business men and mine superintendents, among them Gillis, of the Old Bonanza. Several agreed to throw considerable hauling his way; but Gillis, a dour and grumpy individual with a liver, refused to talk until Packer, his superior, had returned.

That afternoon Chance rode south into the mesquite, across the river, where for an hour he practiced shooting the bone-handled Colt. The gun was fairly accurate and light on the trigger, and he soon acquainted himself with its balance. He shot from every conceivable position, drawing with flashing speed and firing without an instant's delay. Almost invariably the target jumped or twitched obediently—when it did not Chance rehearsed the shot patiently till the results were satisfactory. It was the ritual of the confirmed gunman, taught him by a hard-bitten old drifter whose life had more than once depended on speed and dexterity. Chance had no repute as a gunman, but he had never regretted his ability to handle a gun. It was an accomplishment which commanded respect. He rode back to Bonanza Belt with his mind at rest.

HENRY PACKER he tracked down next morning at the Old Bonanza mine. The superintendent was a stout, oily and inattentive man who scarcely heard Gilbert's proposition. Chance knew him by hearsay; Packer was habitually evasive. But just now the mine was having production trouble, and Henry's preoccupation may have been genuine. He nodded yes, and no, as Chance talked on, his eyes roving vaguely behind thick-lensed glasses.

"Nate MacAloney tells me you see eye to eye with him on this teamin' business," ventured Chance.

Packer assented absently.

"An' I suppose that goes for Robshaw," added Chance smoothly—to which Henry again nodded, confirming Chance's strong suspicion that the other heard scarcely a word that was said.

"I'm makin' Robshaw an attractive proposal in the matter of price," inserted Chance parenthetically. "Shouldn't wonder if it would appeal to you too."

For the first time the man pricked up his ears. "Eh? ....What's that?" Chance repeated his words. They might as well have been Greek to Packer, however. He had Gilbert go over the whole thing again, this time attentive and with unwavering gaze. They talked price for ten minutes; and here Packer was at home, keen and alert. Still he appeared hesitant to commit himself. He was turning something over in his mind.

"You say you've been talkin' this deal over with Robshaw too?" he inquired, with notable casualness.

"Yes, I've seen him two or three times."

"Did you and Larry do business?" persisted Packer bluntly. Chance saw the answer meant something to the man.

"Sure. The Black Prince's teamin' is in my pocket—signed, sealed an' delivered," he assured him.

It decided the mine superintendent. He drove a hard bargain; but by the time they finished he had agreed to give all his teaming to Gilbert after the date on which the Arizona Eastern would render obsolete the ore freights on the San Pedro trail.

"You're a tight-fisted old hog, Henry," thought Chance, on taking his leave of the other. "Drove me to a bargain that'd lose any teamster money. But I'll remedy that once I get things rollin'....You'll yell 'Uncle', old boy, before we're done!" Moreover, Packer's extreme caginess confirmed his strong suspicion of Robshaw's double-dealing. Whatever

the reason, Henry had been careful to follow the other's lead. It all bore a sinister cast that boded ill for someone. Was it Molly—or did she merely stand in the way?

DESPITE an extensive knowledge of freighting rigs, Chance discovered a strong resurgence of interest these days in draught horses and heavy duty drays. He put in time scanning attentively the various long-haul outfits which put in an appearance at Bonanza Belt, and talked with one barman or another.

Molly Mulroy he had not looked for, knowing her to be absent on the long four-day haul to Benson and back; but she was due in again this evening. Late afternoon found him anchored in his chair on the porch at the San Carlos, a curiously exciting anticipation running in his veins. He was quick to see the girl's rig turn in at the bottom of the street, having caught the muffled rumble of the bridge a block and a half away. An unaccustomed tension gripped him as the team drew near, and his eyes never left Molly's sturdy girlish form. Soon she came directly opposite; and now he detected a brief, unaccustomed self-consciousness in her manner. No longer could she pretend to be oblivious of him. Some strong attraction drew her eyes straight to his own—and as suddenly, she flamed scarlet from throat to temples, the rich blood lending her tanned features a dusky charm that Chance found irresistible.

Astonishment held him in its vise for that one electic moment. As quickly as it had happened, Molly then averted her gaze and the outfit rumbled on past. Chance did not even notice Gust Henriks, scowling at him angrily from the trail wagon. His eyes held a far-away look as he retreated into himself in profound surprise.

"She's heard talk, or she's done a lot of thinkin', to make her act like that," he reflected swiftly. "Anyhow, somethin's happened. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts, before the evenin' is out, I'll find out what it is!"

CHAPTER VI

Dust And Blood

FIRM AS Chance's intention was, he was unprepared for the celerity with which it was accomplished. Stepping out of his room at the hotel, shortly after supper, the opening of a door down the hall caused him to look up. To his surprise it was Molly, and she spied him at the same time. For an instant both paused. The girl turned impulsively to go on toward the stairs—only to stop as abruptly and swing back. While displaying renewed traces of her earlier embarrassment, she did not hesitate.

"Mr. Gilbert," she said distinctly, "I have done you an injustice. I acknowledge it now.....I am sorry I struck you."

Chance pretended to look behind him hastily. "Did you say mister?" he smiled. She did not fluster easily, nor did she appear in a mood for banter.

"It angered me as you know to have my wheelhorse shot from ambush. It was unfortunate for me that you should have been the first person I met afterward...When Abe Shoonover rode down from Mammoth an hour later with a span of mules and offered to rent them, of course I had no idea who was responsible for his appearance—until I asked Abe this afternoon. It was uncommonly decent of you to help me in that way after what I had said and done. Anyone who would do that could never have shot poor old Kate.... But I have even better reason for believing you innocent."

It was a handsome reparation, Chance declared at once. Her words evoked his curiosity as well. "Don't tell me you caught the bushwacker—"

She shook her head, her lips compressed. "No—last night, in Benson, a shed against which my wagons were standing was burned to the ground."

"But you saved the outfit," prompted Chance quickly. "It must've taken some quick work."

"Gust saved everything," she nodded curtly. "Much to the disappointment of someone!"

"Then you believe it was deliberate—done by the same man who shot at you?"

Her eyes opened wide, brown as pansies, and they held his own. "Wouldn't you say so?"

"Yes, of course."

For the first time Gilbert became actually alarmed for her. The shot from the hog-back, while puzzling him, had conveyed no stronger impression at the time than one of mystery. Now it began to assume ominous significance. There was seemingly no reason for either of the two attempts. There was no telling what to expect next from such blind malevolence as this.

"It does seem you'd have some idea who's got it in for you to this extent, ma'am—"

"I might know—several." She laughed. "None whom I'd willingly accuse of descending so low."

"Would you say you could tell from a man's looks how low he'd be likely to stoop?" queried Chance curiously.

"Certainly *I've* done nothing to anyone to make him so mortal an enemy," she returned shortly, faintly annoyed.

"Well, then, your swamper—what's his name? Henriks—"

She said definitely: "Gust is hot-headed. He is no fool."

"Um. Well, it's mighty plain somebody's interested in puttin' you out of business." As he spoke he wondered what she would think when she learned of his own activities during the past few days, as she inevitably must.

"That is what I don't understand," said Molly in a troubled voice. "I simply can't believe I have ever made so bitter an opponent of anyone."

HE GUESSED shrewdly that in stepping into her father's boots in the business world she had had no true inkling of what she was up against. Time was in the West when all men would have made her path smooth for her, though many would have died rather than allow her to suspect it. But with the rise of fierce and deadly competition in every field, that old and courtly chivalry of the pioneers was a thing of the past.

"Not that you'd care too much—if it couldn't be helped," he pursued musingly.

"Why, no." She sounded slightly startled. "It's odd, but I shouldn't. But to make enemies needlessly is of course idiotic."

Gilbert nodded, as much to himself as to her. He had gauged her courage correctly. She had good blood in her. It confirmed him in his impulse to leave various things unsaid. If later she thought this strange, the time would come when she would understand.

Not until they parted, a moment later, did Chance realize that throughout the exchange. Molly had never lowered a certain barrier of reserve with him; but he did not mind. It was more than he had had from her before, and he needed only opportunity to improve in the future. As for the present, the least that could be said was that she had given him plenty to think about. There appeared no longer any possible doubt that some force inimical to her was at play. Chance did not ask himself why he was interested; nor did it seem strange that his intention to do something about it should have risen full-formed in his mind.

Passing through the hotel office half an hour later, he saw Nate MacAloney, of the Copper King, talking to the gallused clerk. Watching till MacAloney was free, he stepped forward.

"Nate, I want to ask you a question."

MacAloney bent a waiting look on the floor.

"Did Cliff Mulroy have many enemies that you know of?"

"Eh?" The mine superintendent hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Every man worth his salt has. Expect I have, for that matter. Why're you askin?"

Chance spoke of the shooting of Molly's wheelhorse on the Belt trail.

"I don't s'pose she mentioned that to yuh?"

"No, she didn't." Nate's eyes hardened and his thin nose seemed to grow more pointed, its dents prominent. He asked a number of brusque questions and ruminated the answers. "I see what you're drivin' at" he said after a moment. A glint of new respect flickered in his glance. "What's your slant, Gilbert?"

"I haven't a thing to go on," admitted Chance. He was about to continue when the door slammed open and a man burst in. Chance and MacAloney turned. It was Gust Henriks. The big fellow was angry clear through. He singled out Gilbert and rushed forward menacingly, his gun bobbing at his hip.

"I've jest come from a talk with Robshaw down at the Nugget, Gilbert!" he blurted out accusingly as he halted.

CHANCE EYED with disfavor. "So what?" But the burly swamper had already swung on MacAloney.

"This is the gent that's aimin' to smash Molly! You can't tell me different!" he blared. "After all his soft talk, he's made a dicker with Larry to take over the Black Prince's teamin'!"

His belligerency and his loud tone attracted attention. Several men turned to give ear. MacAloney obviously was not favorably impressed. "I know it," he bit out acidly. "He come to me too." Chance gave him no opportunity to say more, stepping forward with grim mien. His tone held the rasp of a shoeing file.

"What of it, Henriks?....Just what are yuh drivin' at?"

Gust's glare was wild. "Where were you night before last, Gilbert—an' are yuh willin' to tell us what yuh were doin'?"

"Sure—if there's any good reason why you should know," was the contemptuous retort.

"Eh? What's that?" old Nate interjected quickly, scenting a veiled inference in the quick, crackling question and answer.

"An attempt was made that night to burn Molly's wagons, down in Benson," flung back Henriks with great earnestness, the angry crimson of his visage contrasting strangely with his flaxen hair. "Either Gilbert did it or he was behind it!"

Chance's response was prompt and decisive. He laid a ringing slap across Henrik's visage, so quickly that few saw the motion.

"Swallow that talk, mister!"

Henriks bawled furiously and plunged. Gilbert fended him off with a sweeping swing of arm, at the same time tripping him with a boot, and Gust brought up on the floor in a sliding crash that knocked over a couple of chairs. Bewildered but thoroughly aroused, he scrambled excitedly to his feet. Chance blocked his swing but its momentum slammed him into the desk. There ensued a flurry of blows in which the swamper's superior weight appeared to tell. Chance received an angry bruise high on his sore cheek and his mid-section went numb under that hammer-like fist. Ire was building slowly in him. He read Henrik's quality with ruthless judgment. Gust was powerful and ponderous but slow—too slow. He had little cunning and no subtlety. Chance tried to tell himself that Molly depended on this man; that all too often a woman's unreasoning sympathy went with the vanquished. All this he knew, and rashly did not care. Bracing against the desk, he set himself, watched his chance and let go with the unwarning speed of lightning. The terrific impact caught Henriks off-guard and off-balance, hurling him a dozen feet and landing him half through the screened door, which tore with a screech and then banged open.

With a face of iron, Gilbert stepped forward to grasp Henriks by the collar of his torn shirt and drag the man, struggling, to the porch. Contemptuously he thrust him tumbling off the steps.

Cursing wildly, Gust scrambled after his fallen six-gun. But with a hand on it, he paused to look up. Chance was regarding his every move with sardonic care.

"Go as far as yuh like, sport," said Chance softly.

Henriks violently turned his back stuffing his gun away, and stumbled off.

Nate MacAloney spoke dryly at Chance's elbow. "Maybe it ain't old Cliff's ill-wishers at all, Gilbert." Chance's scrutinizing eyes were frosty and unbending.

"Meanin' me?"

"Not a bit." The mine superintendent's tone was easy. "If Molly's man there has been stirrin' up the dust elsewhere—" Chance thought a minute and shook his head.

"No reason the girl should be forced to pay."

"No. But she is," MacAloney pointed softly. "Someone'll have to figger out why."

NODDING, Chance turned back inside. As he stepped through to the hotel bar he heard MacAloney leaving word at the desk that Miss Mulroy was to be notified to see him the first thing in the morning without fail. Gilbert paid no further heed, thoroughly disgusted with his luck. After the row he had just witnessed, MacAloney might accord him respect as man to man; but once the mining man had time to think it over he would begin to see, or believe that he saw, how it only bore out Gust Henriks' accusation that Chance sought to run Molly Mulroy out of business. It would never occur to him that Gilbert was laying plans for a vastly deeper plot.

"I've got to win him over somehow," Chance reflected gloomily. "I'll never get his teamin' any other way."

He was so far plunged in his problem that he made no attempt to see Molly's outfit off for Benson early next morning, and was therefore the more surprised, on leading Walleye out of the livery barn after breakfast, to look up and see the girl advancing on a trim chestnut mare. It must have shown in his eyes as he pulled off his hat.

"Reckon I thought you were some miles down the valley, sittin' a wheeler, by now," he told her.

"Business held me," Molly responded pleasantly. "I am riding now to overtake Gust and the rig."

It was an explanation conceding nothing. There was a suspicious coolness in her brown pupils as though she were still struggling to make up her mind about him. Chance evinced a brief interest in her mare, and finally recognized the horse. It was what was known as a return horse, from Austell's barns, rented occasionally to various mining men on their way back to their jobs from town. Released at some far point in the hills, the mare would in due course turn up at her home stable. In extensive use at one time throughout the mining camps, it was a custom that was fast dying out.

"Headin' back for El Castra myself today," Chance observed and, swinging up, fell in beside the girl.

Molly gave no indication either of welcome or displeasure at his calm proposal to accompany her. She did not speak again as they walked the horses down the lower end of Main, nor did he. They made a striking pair, both erect and free in the saddle; eyes followed them without knowing why. Gilbert lifted a hand once or twice to friends; Molly spoke to an acquaintance. Then the town lay behind, the plank bridge rumbled under brisk hoofs, and they faced the valley with its green and gray and bronze under a vast canopy of living blue. Molly put the mare to a springy jog, and Chance followed suit. It was not a pace suited to talk; neither broke the silence till the first rise slowed the horses to a walk. Even then it was clear the girl did not mean to break the ice. Chance took a slow look at her, then turned his eyes away and smiled.

"That must've been a near thing there in Benson the other night," he began conversationaly.

"Yes, it was."

"Tell me about it."

In an unruffled tone she told the story in some detail. Her tandem oreteam, dumped at the railroad bins, had been parked alongside a sizable shed which formed one wall of the freight yard she habitually used. Late in the evening—toward ten or thereabouts

—the building was seen to burst spontaneously into flames from end to end. Only the frenzied efforts of Gust Henriks, who that night was sleeping on the hay-pile in the corner of the yard, saved the big wagons from destruction. As it was they were charred and blistered. The body of a badly burned drunk was found in the ashes, and it was believed his carelessness had touched off the blaze. Henriks. had detected an odor of coal-oil about the place that night; but he alone seemed to have noticed it.

"Perhaps it was because his suspicions were instantly aroused," said Molly. "Or it may have been imagination. He is normally quiet and orderly. He seems to go wild when danger threatens."

"I've noticed Henriks is a great worker. What makes him plug so hard?"

"Gust is ambitious," declared Molly so promptly that Gilbert glanced at her with suspicion at her simplicity. "He works early and late, and keeps the outfit in better shape than it ever was—and Father was a hard man to please." Regret shadowed her eyes as she recalled the past. Chance felt easier at this change of subject, however. He realized that, following her interview this morning with Nate MacAloney, she must know of his own clash with Henriks. Her silence was not entirely reassuring. Momentarily he had expected the blow to fall; it still might. Yet Gilbert was no stranger to the subtle depth of women. Possibly Molly meant to keep him on nettles.

HE SAID: "Old Cliff's business associates know how to keep his memory bright. They've been good to you."

Unconsciously Molly warmed to this understanding. "Oh, they have—everyone of them! I'm proud to think they are my friends."

"Nate MacAloney speaks up for you without mincin' words," pursued Chance, scanning the iron profile of the Galiuros steadfastly.

"Nate has done much for me, besides being my constant advisor. So have others. I owe Larry Robshaw more, perhaps, than any other single person. . . ." She broke off suddenly. "I wonder why I am telling you all this."

"It's my open, honest face." Chance put on a rueful grin. "Children trust me. I make a special effort with women. You can't help yourself, you see." But behind his banter he was conning the startling significance of her last remarks. Unless he was greatly mistaken there was not the slightest element of irony in her indorsement of Larry Robshaw. There seemed an implication in the discrepancy between what she said, and what he knew of the man, which for the moment escaped him. But it could scarcely be to the credit of Robshaw, who, Chance instinctively felt, would be glad to see Molly Mulroy out of the trucking business for good. Certainly he had made no effort to allot to the girl such teaming work as his mine would afford; nor had he brought any pressure to bear in that direction on Henry Packer, at the Old Bonanza. Presuming Robshaw's lack of interest in the girl's welfare to be only passive at best—did the man's purpose go no farther than this? Chance was unable to guess, but it gave him something to think about.

CHAPTER VII

Turn Back!

GILBERT BURNED to catechize Molly concerning Larry Robshaw. His interest in the man was keen; nor did his growing dislike lessen this in the slightest. But he sensed here a matter in which the girl would prove militant. Were Chance to put Robshaw on the pan it would not escape her critical notice. Wherever the mining man might stand in her affections, there would be no doubting her loyalty to an old friend of the family.

"Why am I worryin' about him anyway?" he thought; but inwardly he knew. It was inevitable that he should come to grips with these matters which touched her destiny so closely, for he found it hard to keep

his mind off the girl. There was strong attraction in Molly's calm self-possession.

"I could really go for you," he said as if in answer to an unspoken question, at the same time nodding his conviction. "I think I will, too."

It was her eyes that dropped; yet her voice was steady enough.

"I hear you say it."

"And mean it! Every word—every move—every breath—" he burst out impulsively, surprised at his own vehemence, but doggedly persisting. "I'm not askin' if there's a chance for me, Molly."

"A man can always hope," she parried lightly, on guard now, and apparently indifferent. Chance knew he would get no satisfaction from her and lapsed into taciturn musing.

His straight gaze ran ahead and for a moment his attention was fixed. He glanced briefly at Molly then. "There's your outfit," he said "Looks as if Henriks had pulled up for somethin'."

Molly followed his glance. Half a mile away the high wagons of her freight outfit were visible. They were standing still, as Gilbert had said. The next moment he noticed something else.

"Say!....Don't believe the teams are hitched up, come to think of it. I wonder—"

Molly verified his observation and her brows knit. Still she did not speak.

"Likely one of the horses threw a shoe and Henriks turned 'em out to browse while he tacks on another one," said Chance to allay her apprehension—although privately he did not believe it. Molly put her mare forward at a lope and Chance stayed beside her. She did not observe him loosening the flap of his saddle-boot and clearing the rifle-stock for ready use, but her own knuckles were white on the mare's rein. They rapidly approached the loaded ore-wagons, standing with a curious air of abandonment in the middle of the trail. Still Henriks failed to put in an appearance.

They drew up at the wagons, and now the story was plain. Neither teams nor driver were in evidence. Molly jogged down beside the wagons toward the head end, and her face slowly tensed. Chance studied her sharply.

"Somethin's happened," he offered reluctantly. She nodded mutely. He could not help asking himself if the same thought was in her mind as had flashed instantly alive in his. But she gave no evidence of idle speculation and no feeling was revealed, on the surface at least. She was all business.

"The horses' tracks are bound to show," she got out colorlessly. Chance had already begun to scrutinize the ground. The teams had cut up the dust considerably. There were boot-tracks of the man who had freed them of their harness. He had recklessly slashed most of it with a knife. Henriks would never have done that.

"Let's not go off the handle about this," warned Chance quietly. "There's an even chance the horses *may* be okay, and Henriks too—" He did not look up as he spoke.

"Why deceive ourselves?." returned Molly as firmly. "I believe I know perfectly well what has happened!"

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because Gust's rifle is gone from the wagon," she pointed out. Gilbert started. She had been keener than he was there. The only sensible solution he could see to the puzzle appeared indisputable. He moved down the trail, working along its edge. What he found removed the last vestige of doubt.

"You're right. At least four men stopped Henriks. They cut the horses out of the harness and drove 'em off —struck south up the trail." He glanced up, studying the rugged profile of the hills. "My guess is they're headin' for Arivaipa canon."

He followed the tracks for a hundred yards, nodded to himself, and turned back. Molly watched wide-eyed as he removed a canteen from one of the wagons. "Anything else here we want?" he queried, hanging the canteen strap over his saddle-horn. "Grub—or an extra gun?"

"What do you intend to do?"

"Follow them horses," he told her

with flashing eyes. She gazed at him intently, and appeared to be pondering.

"There should be food in a box on the head wagon. A hand gun too. I don't know."

He waited while she dismounted to investigate. The box had been pawed over. The gun Molly said was carried there as a precaution was gone, but the simple food staples remained untouched. Dismounting also, Chance wrapped some of the food and a blackened coffee pot in his slicker, which he tied to his cantle. Swinging up, he started off without delay. "Let's get goin'."

Molly looked once at the stranded wagons and turned her back on them. There was nothing else they could do. The spanking load of rainbow ore in the boxes would have to remain where it was. She rode beside Gilbert in silence, jogging or slowing when he did, a deep gravity in her face. She had been doing some thinking during the past twenty minutes. Not the least of the things perplexing her was Chance's reason for what he was doing now, if the tale of his most recent clash with her swamper was true. Gilbert's own concerns she completely set aside, since no one could tell how long or how far this trail would lead. It was no more than she would have expected of any four-square man, yet in Chance she found it unusual and somehow fine.

Half a mile ahead the defile of Arivaipa wash opened without warning through the first hogback ridge of the hills. Mesquite trees enclosed the spot, but down into the dry sandy bed dipped the plain trail of a score of horses. Chance grunted, pointing.

"Here's Henriks' tracks too. He's ploughed right after 'em on foot." Shaking his head, he added: "The man must be a fool. Reckon those gents took all the guns."

Up the broad stream-bed, tufted with water-tortured shrubs and fanged with rocks, the trail of the cavalcade ran bold and plain. No effort had been made at concealment. It told Gilbert what to expect. He drew the bone-handled Colt from his sheath, hesitated, and then handed it over to Molly, butt first. She looked her inquiry as she accepted the gun.

"These hombres'll have a rear-guard out," he told her, "since they'll be forced to follow the wash for miles. They can't get out of it. No tellin' what'll happen."

BUT THRUSTING on doggedly against the slow drag of sand and the steady climb, they saw no one. At the end of an hour Chance called a brief halt for rest.

"We're a couple of hours behind 'em and drawin' up," he opined. "They're not pushin' themselves any. Henriks is doin' pretty good."

"Gust is strong."

Soon Chance said they must press on. But after swinging into the saddle he sat there, gazing ahead and then behind. The silence of the canon was profound; barren, crumbling rocks and weathered formations, the dusty greasewood, stunted oaks and cactus columns dotting the steep sloping south wall, presented a bleak prospect. Already they had reached a wild, remote corner of the mountains. Days might elapse before another human being passed that way. Molly broke into his reverie with quiet words.

"Maybe you'd better turn back now."

Gilbert ignored this suggestion. "If anything happens to you back here in the hills I'll never forgive myself—not to mention what your friends'll say."

She said instantly: "No. I'm going with you."

For miles the course of the wash wound and twisted back and up, deeper into the heights. At no point could they see farther than a few hundred yards in any direction. At times the granite shoulders loomed high and brazen on every hand; but now and again a quiet flat opened out, prettily parked with mesquite trees and willow. Everywhere in the midst of peace and desolation, the ravages of past floods were apparent.

Rounding a bulging knob of eroded rock, they were startled by the sudden crash and crack of sliding gravel and loose stone. The next instant, Gil-

bert picked out the blazing yellow orbs, flattened ears, and lashing club-like tail of a cougar croushed on a low crag over the trail. Shadows of a scrawny cedar mottled the animal's tawny coat. Molly's breath caught with a gasp. With his rifle half-way out of its boot, Chance paused as the cougar turned and slipped sinuously from sight amidst the riven rocks. No need to venture the hollow, carrying crack of a shot in these rocky corridors where its echo would ring for miles and might warn the horse-thieves of pursuit.

"That critter caught scent of the horses," Chance remarked. "Been hanging around on the off chance of grabbin' one for dinner."

Molly gazed round the rims with a new respectful awareness. Faint moisture bedewed her brow and temples. Giving her a glance, Chance said diffidently: "Maybe we ought to rest the broncs again."

She shook her head, with a faint smile. "Not on my account."

THE SUN had long since stood at meridian and begun its long sliding descent. Purple shadows of afternoon found Chance and the girl still riding, with miles of the tortuous desert mountain wash behind them. They talked little, for tension rode with them. Still the quarry was an hour in the lead; and still Gust Henricks' plodding footsteps led on. With the constant rise of the ground he had been able to travel on foot nearly as fast as the horses. Regardless of his qualities as a fighter, the rawboned Dane was proving now that he had stamina to burn. Gilbert would have said that the man had no chance against four armed outlaws; but now he began to entertain hopes. He thought he read the driving determination which drove Henriks on.

Slow sunset drew across the forlorn ranges, painting the rocky surfaces and darkening the rugged, massed Galiuros to imponderable solidity. Chance more than once glanced toward Molly with speech on his lips. Each time he held it back, knowing her pride, and knowing that night must inevitably halt them. At last Chance reached a turn of the trail revealing farther reaches of limitless rock enshrouded in gloomy grandeur, with the way solitary and apparently empty of life before them; and here he halted. Even as he turned his pony to speak, a hollow *spang* rang out from the shattered battlements of the rim. Walleye reared wildly and came down on all fours, shuddering and shaking. Before Molly's horrified gaze, Chance slipped swiftly out of the saddle and the roan sagged and then buckled, to collapse in the dust. A widening dark stain appeared on the horse's flank; it lifted its head weakly, and already its eyes were wild and reasonless. Rifle in hand, Chance sprang toward Molly, his face aflame.

"Get down!" he yelled at her. "Get under cover—quickly!"

But it was already too late. The aim of the hidden, ruthless marksman was unerring. The mare screamed. She strove to bolt, coughing blood through a ragged hole in her slim throat, and then crumpled.

Molly was thrown clear, to roll toward a rock behind which she crouched, to peer out at Gilbert. Regardless of danger, Chance knelt in the open and, throwing his rifle to his shoulder, began hammering the crags methodically with probing slugs.

There was no answer.

CHAPTER VIII

Out Of The Saddle

GILBERT remained for a long moment kneeling, immobile, and then got to his feet, the rifle slanting in his grasp. Molly gazed at him uncomprehendingly.

"Aren't you taking an unnecessary risk, standing there in the open?" she called. He shook his head.

"You don't get it. Whoever that is, he could have drilled us with his first shot, instead of the horses—if that was his object." His brows corrugated with the intensity of his thought. "There's just one point here I don't

savvy.....What's happened to Henriks?"

Molly got up to move forward. The bone-handled six-gun looked huge in her small hand. "What's that?"

"They can't be very far ahead if they've a guard posted here," he pointed out. "He polished off our broncs in a hurry. He could have put Henriks away as easily....He must've let him pass without a sign, or we'd have found the body."

She looked startled. "But you don't believe they wanted to shoot us—"

"Why, yes, that must be it," Chance nodded slowly. "They must consider him harmless or they'd have stopped him. And they let us follow far enough into the hils, before puttin' us afoot, so we won't get out of this in a hurry."

She said: "A six or seven-hour walk down to the Belt trail...."

"No," he returned, with hardening face. "I ain't turnin' my back on Walleye. If this ain't murder, the hombre that done it 'll think so before I get done with him."

There was no boastfulness in his voice, only deadly seriousness. Watching his face, she agreed silently. Without doubt the perpetrators of this affair would regret it before it was over.

Gilbert started to remove the saddles from the horses as he spoke. Light was failing fast now, and Molly helped. They dragged the saddles aside.

"I'm sorry," said Moly impulsively. "You loved your horse."

There was no word of her own troubles, and Chance noted the omission. "Darn good thing we brought these canteens," he remarked colorlessly. "If there's water within miles of this place I don't know where it is."

THERE was no thought of proceeding further now. Chance found a protected niche in the rocks where he set up camp. Fortunately they had their blankets; at that altitude the evening chill would soon settle down. The blaze Chance made of dry mesquite wood splashed the naked rock with cheerful gold-red. Canon swallows had ceased their twittering. Far in the hills a coyote yipped and yodeled. Chance's simply prepared meal found them ravenous.

"Good thing I packed this grub, too," he grunted.

"Goodness—yes!" she assented fervently. "I'm hungry as a bear," she laughed as if almost ashamed of her appetite, but went back to her tin plate. Chance covertly observed her with interest. All trace of restraint was gone; engrossed in this adventure, she was completely her natural self. They talked before the fire while Gilbert rolled a smoke and demolished it with a half dozen deep drags. Finally he stood up, stretching his lean strength.

"We better hit the blankets," he remarked then; and Molly nodded.

"Yes, I think so....What are you going to do next?" she asked.

"Right now my mind is more or less made up. But we'll let morning decide."

He picked up blanket and saddle and moved off a dozen yards into the darkness. While he did not watch her, he was conscious of Molly making ready for rest beyond the dying fire. Then minutes later, rolled in his blanket, his head on his saddle as he had slept a thousand times, Chance grew suddenly aware that he was no nearer sleep than when he had lain down. His mind was busily prospecting a dozen subjects. Thumping the saddle, he rolled over and tried again, finally to raise his head restlessly and then sit up. It was no use. Tonight something lurking hidden in the back of his head was bothering him. He was wide awake.

He sat for a moment listening intently. Something had moved down there in the shadows. A moment later he caught it again—no more than a faint change of lighter shades. Whatever that dark form was, it moved that way. Chance caught the muffled scuff of a boot. His nerves twitched sharply and then steadied, and he knew where he stood.

By slow degrees, lest his own figure be discernible against the gray of granite and porphyry, he sank

down to merge with the dark-bodied sage-bush beside him, and there, motionless as stone, he waited. His rifle lay twenty yards away; Molly had his six-gun. Whoever this approaching man might be, there could be no mistakes. With slitted eyes Chance watched him draw near, distinct of shape now, stealthy, cautious and silent. Abruptly the man stopped a few feet away, and Chance's thews tensed. He had been seen! But the shine of the man's eyes, the turn of his head, gave the answer. The other had suddenly spotted the glow of the dying campfire and stood arrested. Next instant he dropped on all fours, but did not retreat. Chance refrained from moving a muscle, and almost ceased breathing, while the other warily tested the silence and the shadows. The fellow's heavy breathing was audible, as if he had been running. Satisfied at length, he raised himself cautiously and began to move toward the fire in a crouching position, pausing to reconnoiter, and following the natural obstacles affording cover.

IT WAS this circumstance which offered Gilbert his opportunity. He could stalk with the stealth of a cougar; and it required all his cunning to draw up on the vigilant stalker unobserved and unsuspected. Like a lizard he crept over the rocks, every muscle in his body flexed and ready. He was cool now, absolutely steady. Ten feet from the fire he rose to full height like a shadow and plunged squarely on the man before him.

On his hands and knees, with head lifted high, the other had no slightest inkling of what was coming. The hard weight of Chance's rugged frame smashed him flat in the dust; but with the shock of his recoil, he thrashed over and tore at his assailant like mad. Chance was grim. Over and over they rolled, with grunt and heave and thud.

An involuntary exclamation sounded from the direction of Molly's blankets. She sprang up; and as one of Chance's boots kicked the embers of the fire to life, her startled face appeared. She stepped forward, gun in hand. For an instant she stared at the struggling men as if transfixed. At that moment Gilbert's antagonist twisted free and sprang up. He loomed giant-like in the murky dusk. The gun in Molly's hand cracked flatly; a tongue of orange flame leaped from its muzzle. Before the slug found its mark Chance's driving shoulders buckled the man at the knees. Down they went again! They rolled closer to the fire, Gilbert uppermost. Molly peered sharply, and a shock ran through her. Her taut cry burst forth.

"Chance! Gust!.... Stop it!"

Neither heard her at once. But after an instant Gilbert paused, glaring at the man under him. With a disgusted growl he flung the other off and slowly straightened. Gathering his forces with a snarl, Gust Henriks poised for a leap—and then, darting an amazed look at Molly, he sagged back. "Huh?" he hoarsely voiced his complete bewilderment.

"Thank goodness we've found you," exclaimed Molly, with a breath of relief. Standing taciturn and observant as he took this in, Gilbert said nothing. With dawning comprehension, the Dane's exploring glance sought him inquiringly.

"Damn you, Gilbert!" Henriks burst forth wrathfully. "What'd you jump me that way fer?"

"Ask yourself that question." Chance's look was freezing.

"Why, dammit, if I was creepin' an' crawlin', was it any wonder? I been afoot all day! I heard shootin' back here a couple hours ago—"

"Gust," interposed Molly firmly and quietly.

"Aw hell! I know." He turned to her in earnest remonstrance. "Gilbert was guardin' yuh an' all. But damn him, he knowed who I was all the time! There wasn't no call fer him to stomp an' gouge me that way!"

"It was an unfortunate occurence after your trying day," she conceded. "But bickering will not bring back my stolen horses, Gust."

IT WAS the one thing she could have said to bring Henriks to his

senses. He cleared his throat and looked crestfallen. "Nobody's tried harder'n me to get 'em back," he grumbled doggedly.

"I know. You've done all anyone in your position could do," said Molly swiftly. "What happened, Gust? Have you learned anything?"

"Wal, they're up ahead—"

"But you saw nothing of the guard who shot our horses?"

"What—?" He stared at her and his jaw dropped. He shook his head slowly. "So we're all afoot?....No, I didn't see nor hear no guard. Reckon he coulda laid fer me anywheres in twenty miles—an' got me too. But he didn't."

"They have no fear of us on foot," observed Gilbert thinly.

"Naw." Henriks was curt. "Means they intend to keep on travelin'—pushin' them hawses. That's my readin' anyhow. Likely they'll turn up over in Safford, or even further east."

"Or else they want us to think so." Chance interposed easily. Gust scowled. Manifestly he had no desire to sit in council with this man whose treatment of him, thrice over, he was not likely to forget.

"But my teams cannot travel fast," put in Molly hastily. "They hate being run—and it is bound to wear them out. We still have a chance. Haven't we?" she appealed to Gilbert.

"And a good one," he nodded confirmation. While hitherto he had been undecided, in the face of Gust Henriks' dejection Chance's resolve became iron. "We'll have 'em tomorrow, if there's no slips."

"I'm jest as likely to slip as you are, an' not a bit more!" exclaimed Henriks contentiously, his big face reddening. "You ain't so dang wonderful, Gilbert! If you'd kept yore nose out of this I'd 've settled it my way!" His choler mounted as he ran on.

Chance balled his fist and stepped forward, face hard. He had had more than enough of this heckling.

"Chance!" Molly stopped him, her voice cool and provoked. "Why must you bedevil him so?"

Gilbert's look was unyielding. "Shucks, Molly! I'm plumb sick of this damned baby bellerin'."

"Then why don't yuh leave Molly alone!" cried Henriks, beside himself with jealousy and hurt pride. "What are yuh botherin' for?"

Chance's retort was contemptuous. "We were gettin' along swell till *you* showed up."

MOLLY'S quick look at him was one of surprised discovery. What Chance said was true. Absorbed in her own concerns, until that moment she had accepted him unquestioningly, welcoming his protection with implicit trust.

"Boys," she sighed with forlorn whimsicality, "this is worse than cabin fever. I don't want you two to quarrel. Let's forget it. We've something vastly more important to think about."

Gilbert's acquiescence was readily given. He appeared to bear no deep-seated grudge. Henriks gave in with poor grace, however. His deep concern for Molly, his fears for the success of his suit for her favor, would have been plain to a child. In Chance's cool self-assertion and indomitable pugnacity he read a threat to his own hopes. He would have grasped any means to rid himself of such strong competition. But he did not know what to do.

"What is there to eat?" he muttered, swinging away. With a low cry of self-reproach Molly set about preparing food.

"Gust—what happened back there on the Belt trail?" she asked presently. Henriks' story was brief. Four horsemen had accosted him on the road and stopped to talk. Without warning they had bent their guns on him, taken his own weapon, cut the teams free, after being forced to knock him down, and had started away, with dire threats of what would happen if he attempted to folow.

"Who were they?" queried the girl. "Did you recognize any of them?"

Henriks shook his head. The four had been total strangers, or that was the impression he gave. He did not appear disposed to discuss the affair.

After giving the bare facts, he lapsed into silence and waited, sullen and self-contained. Wolfing down the simple fare Molly set before him, he sat gazing into the fire broodingly. A moment later his head sagged and he slumped back. Sleep had overpowered him with suddenness of a blow.

"He's worn out," murmured Molly softly.

"Henriks did good," Chance agreed. "But so did you, ma'am. Worse may be waitin' us all tomorrow. You'd better get your rest."

She vouchsafed him a reserved glance in which lurked something of secret amusement. "You called me Molly before."

"And a fine name it is for a minx of a Mulroy," he grinned, "Good night—Molly."

"Good-night, Chance—"

CHAPTER IX

Molly's Mule

"WHAT'S the next move?" growled Gust Henriks as they sipped their meager allowance of coffee in the first gray light of early dawn. He looked to Molly for his answer. In turn the girl, fresh and ravishing in morning dishevelment, sought Chance's opinion.

"Do you feel we should push on regardless?" she inquired.

"If I had my way, Henriks would take you back to the San Pedro," said Chance. "There isn't a ranch in forty miles. Might run acrost a prospector with a bronc or—mule but that's one chance in a hundred. Our game now is to play a certainty."

"No yuh don't!" Henriks burst out wrathfully. Before he could continue, Molly cut him off.

"Gust—take me back?" she repeated. "And leave you to follow the horses alone? ....Why should you assume all this risk?"

"Why depend on him at all, yuh mean," insisted Henriks flatly. Chance's voice revealed no trace of resentment at the challenge, but his eyes were flinty.

"Given a free hand, I'd have those horses back in forty-eight hours, as I said. Can you say the same, Henriks?"

"Sure—I can *say* it," was the stout retort.

"No matter," Molly ruled decisively, at once. "I can't let you run that risk, Chance. We'll all go on as long as we can."

Gilbert set about gathering their few effects. The two saddles were cached in the rocks. He hesitated over the blankets, but in the end decided to take them along. In a moment they were ready to start. Sunrise broke over the rugged Pinaleno range as they plodded on. The air was crisp and dry; the first flush of the sun held a grateful warmth. At this hour the desert world cradled a magic promise. The restricted view was inexpressibly wild. Ragged plum-colored clouds in the south enhanced the strange effect. There was a dark richness about the sage and mesquite clumps; sentinel cactus stood fifty feet high, stark and majestic, on the rocky shoulders, their shadows miles long in the slanting reddish sunlight.

Chance began to whistle in his excess of good spirits, but broke off abruptly.

"Let me have that six-gun," he told Molly, "and I'll clean it." Henriks' lingering glance toward the firearm at the girl's waist had reminded him of it. She handed it over. When the bone-handled Colt was swabbed out and reloaded, Chance thrust it in his holster. The big Dane took note of the action.

"Don't want 'er to carry it no more, eh?" he spoke up harshly. Gilbert shook his head in denial.

"A .45 isn't so easy to pack afoot," he returned.

"That ain't yore reason for keepin' it," Henriks charged.

Chance hesitated, then shook his head again. "Since you mention it, it isn't," he admitted coolly.

"Don't want me to get hold of it, I s'pose?" Gust thrust on tauntingly.

"Not at all....As a matter of fact,

the gun isn't mine. I got it from Sammy Bodine, in El Castra. Told me some cock-and-bull story about its bearing a curse, Sam did. He said anyone packin' it was bound to shoot somebody sooner or later!....I'm not superstitious," Chance averred, with a grin. "But after Molly took a crack at you last night before she knew who yuh was, I couldn't help rememberin' what Bodine said."

"An' yuh believe such loco stuff as that?" Henriks's eyes blazed contemptuously.

"Well—it made me uncomfortable," drawled Chance. "No use denyin' that."

"Maybe yo're afraid to let me pack the gun—for the same reason," challenged Henriks meaningfuly. Their eyes clashed.

"You mean I'm afraid maybe you might plug me?" Chance's teeth showed in a mirthless smile. Next moment he unclasped the cartridge belt supporting the holstered six-gun and held it out. His tone was sarcastic,

"Molly Mulroy's mule—that's you! ....I may have my doubts about you, Henriks," he added coldly. "But don't make any mistake. I'm still ready and able to take care of myself where you're concerned!"

HENRIKS appeared too pleased to have the gun to concern himself further with argument; nor did he offer it again to Molly. He buckled it on with a grunt and they plodded on in an unpleasant silence.

The trail of the stolen horses ran broad and plain before them. With every step Gilbert liked the prospect less. Clouds were gathering fast; the first fresh brightness of the morning had dulled. Alone, he might have stolen up the canon unobserved. The three of them were like so many guileless doves, defenseless against the swoop of the hawk. If Henriks understood this he gave no indication of it. Chance deliberately put all thought of the man from his mind and addressed himself to the task in hand.

The horse-tracks in the sand appeared hours old, but that, after the passage of night, meant nothing. Molly's teams might be only a few miles away. As Chance studied the majestic, glooming walls his conviction grew that this was the case. They were high in the hills now. The bronze Galiuro crests loomed large and near at hand. Sand and wind-carved boulders appeared on the spired canon rims, and up there they heard the eternal winds tearing with eerie roar, and shriek, and moan. Toward midday they reached a point where the canon forked, a wild, ragged spot. The trail of the stolen horses led up the smaller fork. Standing there, Gilbert studied the surrounding with misgiving. For some reason he did not at all like the look of things.

Henriks started doggedly up the fork, with jaw thrust out, and Chance called to him.

"Hold on. That ain't the main canon. The valley lies up this way." He pointed to the other fork which began at that point to swing toward the south.

"The hawses went this way," flung back Henriks, hardly bothering to turn; but Molly paused, caught by something in Chance's tone.

"Valley?" she questioned.

"The main wash runs up to a high valley back in here," Chance explained. "It's the trail out....Probably the teams are still up there." He indicated the smaller canon fork. "But it's a trap."

"Then what're we waitin' for?" blurted Henriks.

Chance shook his head curtly. "You're makin' a mistake to barge up there now. Don't go!"

"Why not?" Henriks was incredulous, yet held.

CHANCE didn't know himself. His good sense had warned him. "If you and Molly will wait here while I go on, I may get some results," he strove to put his feeling into words. "At worst it will mean only an hour or two....To push on up that canon, the three of us, might be just plain suicide."

Molly appeared impressed by his words, glancing about at the beetling

walls. She made no attempt to leave his side. But Henriks was not persuaded.

"What are yuh givin' us now, Gilbert? Aimin' to grab some glory for yoreself, ain't yuh?" he flung over his shoulder carelessly.

"Stop where yuh are, Henriks!" Chance shouted at him—for the other was a hundred feet in the lead and already entering the canon mouth.

"Gust—I think you should listen to Chance," called Molly anxiously. He only waved a disposing hand and strode on.

A moment later the hollow, ringing crack of a rifle banged resoundingly back and forth between the narrow confining walls. Sand spouted from the floor of the wash a few yards before Henriks, where the slug had struck. It was a warning plain and unmistakable, but Gust failed to heed it. Snatching the six-gun out, he sprang forward, making for a large rock some distance beyond.

Dropping his pack, Chance leaped for cover, dragging the girl with him. From the vantage of a protecting ledge he watched. There was no evidence of the man who had fired down from the rim. The Dane was too busy at the moment to hear anything but the repeating, spiteful crash of the outlaw's rifle. A bullet which tore up the ground at his very feet hauled him up short. Plainly the hidden marksman was both accurate and determined. But Gust was frenzied, raging at being thus balked. Once more he plunged forward, the slugs bouncing before and behind him, whining off the rocks with a wicked shrill buzz. They proved too much for Henriks. He became rattled. Tripping over a stone in his wild hast, he skidded headlong.

Chance and Molly saw the dust fly as the lethal bullet, evidently meant for an extra sharper warning, sapped into Gust's shirt-back at the instant he measured his length on the ground. The big man let out a horse, bellowing yell. He strove to rise, faltered, and then sank back.

Molly's breath sucked in sharply and her eyes dilated. "Oh! *Gust!* .... He's shot!" she screamed. Abruptly, then, she regained command of herself. Gilbert for the nonce paid no attention, scanning the broken rim outlined against a steel-gray sky with slitted gaze. He flung up his carbine and fired several quick shots —with what result it was impossible to determine. For with Henrik's fall the rifleman up in the rocks fell inactive once more. Silence returned, fateful, oppressive. Molly watched Chance, waiting in that frozen moment for him to act. Pulling the brim of his Stetson down with a curt jerk, he appeared to have forgotten her. Once more Molly's mule had won his point; and now he had his reward. His icy glance resting steadily on Henriks' motionless form, Chance shambled forward.

CARBINE in hand, he knelt beside the big Dane and rolled him over on his back. Henriks was unconscious. Blood soaked the front of his shirt round a shredded tear. As Chance stared at it the girl spoke by his shoulder.

"Right over the heart!" she exclaimed in a choked voice. "Is he—gone?"

He shook his head in a slight negative. "It didn't get him in the heart. Close, though. Too damn close."

"But the bullet stayed in?"

Chance looked carefuly. "No. It tore through and came out below, here." He spoke slowly. "They've killed Henriks, or the next thing to it. If he lives through this it'll be a miracle!"

Molly looked about. "We can't leave Gust here. There's nowhere we can take him without killing him getting him there! What can we do?"

Chance did not immediately answer. Already he was busying himself cleaning the supine man's wounds. He had Henriks' shirt off and was not sparing their water. "Give me some clean cloth," he grunted. Molly tore generous strips from an undergarment, and with them Chance fashioned wet pads which he bound securely over the wounds.

"He's bleedin' hard," he muttered. "The wet packs may stop it." He glanced up then, shrewdly judging

how she was taking all this. What he saw must have satisfied him, for he made no comment. His look embraced their inhospitable surroundings, and included the cold gray sky. The wind was rising and there was a bite in the air. A spell of cold weather would not be good for Henriks in his present condition. "Have to get him under cover somewhere. He'll be runnin' a high fever in a matter of hours."

Using extreme care, he worked his arms under Henriks and lifted him up. The Dane was raw-boned and brawny; he was heavy. Chance staggered, caught himself with a snap of whiplike muscles, and started back toward the canon forks. Molly moved by his side. She looked up the gloomy defile behind them with an involuntary shudder. Heavy, scrolled clouds were hastening across the heavens. They made a somber background for the darkening rocks. A swooping wind gust scooped up brown dust and flung it in their faces as they paused at forks. Here the canon widened out; on one side a gigantic rubble slope, on the other a vast, cracked and riven cliff. It was toward this barrier that Gilbert bent his uncertain steps. A stiff slope of detritus led up to the naked rock. Appearing small from a distance below the massive wall, it grew in size and height as they neared it. They clambered and scrambled upward, loose shale sliding beneath their feet. The gusty puffs tore at them; brush growing in the rock niches nodded and jerked. A rumble of thunder, deep-toned, resonant, rolled over the mountain world and echoed in the gorge. Molly was soon panting and wet with perspiration despite the rapidly lowering temperature. She marveled at Chance's strength. But the time came when even he had to rest. He cautiously deposited Henriks on the ground and flexed his cramped and stiffened arms.

"Where are we going?" gasped Molly. He nodded toward a deep and shadowy cleft gashing the solid wall of rock, his chest heaving. "There's shelter—of a kind!"

PRESENTLY they went on. The slope was even longer than it had appeared from below. They made it at last, to thrust through a fringe of osier and chaparral into the rocky mouth of the crevasse. Here Gilbert settled the wounded man in as comfortable a position as he could manage, and straightened. "I'll go after the blankets and stuff. Lucky I packed my rope along. We can rig some kind of a tent maybe."

"That awful slope to climb again!" She looked at him soberly. "I could have carried the stuff up. I forgot it utterly."

He said: "You did all right. Brought the carbine," and turned away. Long strides took him down the rugged declivity in sliding bounds. In the open, he scanned the angry sky. It was darkening rapidly; thunder rumbled frequently now. Gathering their few belongings at the canon fork, he retraced his course. A few drops of rains brushed his face as he climbed the dragging high slope once more. It had settled in, a steady drizzle, by the time he panted into the dark, frowning split in the rocks; a gusty shower which whipped into the recess itself. Molly sat protecting Henriks' face with her hat. "This," she declared, "will not do, Chance."

He cast back into the dark-shrouded cleft. It was not deep. Blocks and chunks of granite fallen from above choked it. Chance could discern little till an incandescent flash of lightning illuminated the narrow rift. Frowning, he scratched his head and shrugged. That broken treacherous upward slant of rubble at the back of the crevasse looked impossible to climb. Perhaps it could be just managed. He turned back and, wrapping the senseless Dane in a blanket, lifted him up.

"Chance—what you intend is insane!" exclaimed Molly as she divined his object. "What is to be gained by going up there?"

"Caves," he elucidated briefly. "Up there in the cliffs. I've seen 'em chousin' cows through here."

She caught her breath. "Rain will sluice down in torrents, of course.

Dry cover would be a godsend. But if they should be guano caves—?"

"Risk we'll have to take," he grunted.

IT DID not take Gilbert long to decide that the task he had undertaken would tax strength and ingenuity to the utmost. To do it single-handed was out of the question. However, Molly soon proved a real help. Climbing the rocks from hand-hold to hand-hold, guarding against their greasy dampness, burdened by their few possessions, she displayed none of the usual feminine clumsiness or uncertainty. She was muscular, her grip hard and sure. Together they lifted and dragged Henriks forward and upward in the deepening, treacherous twilight. The girl soon ceased to ask herself the reason for this killing exertion. Her lungs hurt, her whole body burned, she tore her clothing; yet she toiled on with blind loyalty. At last they reached a long slope of slick rock up which it appeared impossible to work the unconscious man. It was heartbreaking, so near to the top. Gilbert laid a moment's pressure on her arm.

"Good man, pardner!" he murmured. "Can you hold him where he is for a few minutes?"

Molly nodded mutely, a flush of obscure pleasure suffusing her at his words. What did he mean to do? She was soon to learn. In the rising gale which sucked through the cleft, he moved to the sidewall and aided his upward progress by clinging to precarious niches and breaks in the ragged stone. It seemed forever before he surmounted the long slope, slithering forward like a lizard, and disappeared over the top. Molly heard no more in the moaning, shrieking wind. Lightning flashes blinded her. The crashing peals of thunder threatened to crush her; they bore the weight and impact of a giant hand. Rivulets of rain seeped under the girl. She wondered if she could hang on much longer. A shock ran through her as something slapped the rock near by and a rough object thudded against her it squirmed and settled softly—then, with sudden weakening relief, she understood. Chance had carried his rope coiled over his shoulder for such an emergency. Fastening it above, he had tossed the loose end over and down to her. Presently his dark shape appeared amidst the frowning rock masses. He slid down the manila hand over hand.

"Fine," he muttered, reaching her and Henriks. His arm went round her. "Breathe a spell. Then up we go."

Molly scarcely knew how they maneuvered Gust's heavy frame up the steep incline. But for the rope it would have been only a fantastic hope. Somehow they succeeded. What remained was simple drudgery. Gilbert carried Henriks, supported by Molly. Clambering up over a broken, uneven surface, they won to comparatively level ground, where acres of storm-cloud lay open to view. A vast rolling sea, black and ominous of aspect, it hurried unbroken, ragged, dark, and so low it seemed just overhead. Wisps of it shredded on the rocky spires. Here the wind buffeted and tore at them. Chance led the way, clinging to a high, broken ledge. Stunted sage bobbed in the tearing blast. Whipping cedars loomed before them. A dark opening appeared, with a gray jutting flat roof. The rising rainstorm lashed down over its edge, whiplike. Molly staggered on at Gilbert's heels, to find herself inside a cave, dry, pitch black, and marvelously free of the tug and swirl of the merciless wind.

"Thank God!" She sank down, suddenly used up. The hard unyielding rock under her meant nothing.

CHAPTER X

Sanctuary Of The Sage

GILBERT was moving about in the unrelieved darkness. Finding his matches dry, he struck one, and its yellow flare burst brilliantly. Near the level cave entrance lay a rotting cedar, and this he kicked and tore to fragments. Soon he had a blaze leaping, dispelling the somber shadows.

He would not give himself up to rest. A few boughs from the cedar guarding the cave made a meager pallet over which was spread a blanket. Carefully he laid Henriks thereon. "Better get those wet clothes off," he told Molly, "and dry out. Wrap yourself in the other blanket."

She made no response, but a moment later rose with a sigh, and he was conscious of her guarded movements across the fire. Chance did not look up. He was removing the wounded man's bandage gingerly with some anxiety. The puncture over Henriks' ribs had ceased bleeding, but the other and larger wound, where the bullet had made its exit, was still open. Chance renewed the wet pack and bound it once more. Then he wrapped Henriks in the blanket for warmth. Molly's shirt and levis lay spread over a rock before the fire, and the girl sat slack against the cave wall, swarthed to the chin in her blanket. She was shivering.

"Get yourself warmed through," he advised. "I'll make coffee. We'll both feel better."

Warmth lulled Molly's senses to heavenly ease. Though aware of the storm's crash and roar outside, she was indifferent to it. They had their coffee and it relaxed some deadly tension in them. Time drifted by. Gradually the cave mouth lightened. They could see the slanting rain now, a gray deluge, the rocky precipices looming, magnified and misty, through its swirling curtain. It finally slackened, but was still falling when the first break came in the clouds; light streamed across the sky. The sun burst through, low, brilliant and yellow.

Conscious of a rumbling ominous roar encroaching on the returned silence, Molly moved to the entrance. She was amazed that so much of the day was gone; it was late afternoon. Below through a rocky cleft she glimpsed the Arivaipa canon. The depths were a twisting, roily red turmoil of rushing, rolling, tumbling waters. Uprooted sage bushes rode the current; a felled cottonwood log rolled over and over, helpless, its bedraggled foliage threshing. Molly gasped. Next moment Chance was at her side.

"No wonder you insisted on our coming up here!" she exclaimed, a deep thrill in her tone, her gaze fascinated by the violence of the flood.

"Our saddles are probably tumblin' in the San Pedro by now," remarked Chance, his eyes narrowed. "Never any tellin' what a flash flood'll do in these hills."

LIFTING her glance at last, Molly looked out over the near slope with its dripping forlorn sage, and the glistening ridge crests. The cave faced west, and that way the view was unimpeded. The corrugated land fell away below, seamed and gashed, to flow a hundred miles and more. In that broad outlook the San Pedro valley was engulfed as though it never had been; over the vast panorama streamed the low slanting rays of the declining sun, richly red, glistening in the last bright drops of rain. Toward the sunset the iron ranges marched endless and beautiful, shaded purple and mauve.

Molly glanced round at Gilbert and paused. He was dubiously examining the six-gun he had once more strapped round his own waist. However, it appeared in order. Taking up his rifle, he carefully wiped it. Molly's faint smile faded as she watched.

"What are you going to do?"

"We need grub," he responded evasively, avoiding her eye. "I'm wonderin' how game is up here." Molly's slim brown arm emerged from the folds of the blanket and she laid an arresting hand on his arm.

"Chance, you're not planning to go —down there again?"

He knew what she meant, and shook his head impatiently. "Not now, anyway. Couldn't get across that wash before mornin' if I tried." The words relieved her. She said:

"If you could knock over a rabbit it would help—"

His nod was noncommittal. "We may have to stick it out here a few days. Henriks can't be moved. Keep the fire up, and watch him for fever. We're in for a siege before he begins to mend."

"You'll be back soon, Chance?"

"Sure," he said gruffly. "But you're not afraid to stay alone."

Molly smiled faintly. Darkness and solitude in the wilderness held no terrors for her. She found it impossible to express in just what manner her uneasiness was connected with the prospect of his absence.

"No, of course not. But it will soon be dark. You don't know these hills."

He moved close to look down into her eyes. "I wish I could be sure you meant that."

"But I do!" was her ready answer. Chance leaned the carbine against the rock wall. Purposefuly he took her into his arms and crushed her to him, lithe and supple in the enfolding blanket. Her lips were cool and ardent. For a long minute he held so, and then stepped back. Again their eyes met, and Molly's did not flinch. A slow flush crawled under the bronze of Chance's lean cheeks.

"I couldn't help that," he got out deliberately. "And I reckon I didn't try very hard." She laughed with him, her laugh freer than his own.

"So you want me to forgive you, do you?"

There was amused malice in the query. Suddenly she seemed as far removed from him as ever, strange and complex of nature. Shaking a stubborn denial, he said: "I don't aim to have you forget me either."

He turned away, abrupt of movement.

"I'm goin' now. I'll be back."

THE LAST ruddy rays of sunset filtered into the cave, silhouetting on the rock the nodding cedar branches outside; but the biting chill did not leave the air. Gradually the sun's light faded and flickered out. The small circle of sky which she could see grew salmon pink, fading to pearl and then to plum. When she looked again it was a lifeless gray. Unconsciously Molly's apprehensions leaped to activity once more. Night closed down with its heavy silence, and still Chance did not return. The dull rumble of the flood-laden wash, forgotten till it sprang loud and harsh into her attention, was a fit accompaniment to her reflections. Gust stirred and muttered, or suddenly waved an erratic arm. The hour plunged her deep into melancholy sadness. So firm was the grip the girl had on herself, however, that when Gilbert stamped into the cave unheralded half an hour later she only tossed him a glance, though her heart leaped high.

"Back again?" She spoke lightly. "Hope you haven't forgotten the cooking pot."

"Couple birds was the best I could do," he grunted, and fell to preparing them for supper. Ravenous as both were, they enjoyed their meal. Picking a wing-bone clean, Chance glanced across the fire curiously.

"You fit into this mighty well," he observed, noting the flush on her cheeks.

"But scarcely as well as you." Her eyes rested amiably on his bronzed throat. "You've spent years in the open of course."

Chance acknowledged the charge. "Practically raised there. I was born in a Santa Fe camp. My dad hauled meat for the army—buffalo beef. First thing I could remember was the feel of rawhide reins in my hands; reckon Pop was holdin' them," he grinned.

"Then you come naturally to punching cows."

"Sure. I was kid foreman on a Texas drive. Those Lone Star waddies—some of 'em old fellers of forty—are good hombres. They gave me all the breaks," mused Chance reflectively.

"I hear you've wrangled horses too—" He looked up quickly, wondering how she could know that; but he only nodded. Recalling an exciting incident that had occurred while he was running wild mustangs in Horse Valley, in lower Utah, he told her about it. "I chased a blood mare for four months," he concluded, "and wound up by breakin' her neck. It cured me. I drifted south and rode for one cow outfit or another."

"But you're not with Vale's Dumbell brand now—"

There it was again: that betraying

knowledge of his variegated past. Chance grinned. "No, Buck gave me my time."

"Why?" Molly spoke directly.

"I asked for it," drawled. Chance. At this juncture, Henriks started up from his bed, muttering wildly. Chance pinned him down waiting for the seizure to pass. His sober gaze sought Molly's; he shook his head.

"Can't have him tearin' them wounds open."

THE BIG Dane was quiet for a moment, only to break out again, his spells occurring with increasing frequency. They went through the battle with him for most of the night, relieving each other at his side. His fever was raging. They assuaged it by the sole means at their command. Once Gilbert left the cave to replenish their dwindling water supply in the canteens, which he was able to do at the rocky hollows filled by the rain. He returned to report a decided drop in the temperature, which came as no surprise to the girl; for a long time her extremities had been freezing despite the blanket. Molly had believed it was nervous tension; but Chance said no. Procuring more fuel, he built up the fire to a brisk blaze.

"Henriks is quieter now. Get warmed through, an' try to sleep," he said. "I'll call you if there's any change."

So weary she could barely hold her head up, Molly sought no quarrel with her conscience in complying obediently. Sometime later she awoke to a droning beat which sounded like more rain. Thinking she must be mistaken, and too deliciously drowsy to inquire, she drifted off again. When she awoke still later to chilling air with a bite in it, the cheerless gray of dawn filtered in at the cave mouth, and revealed Gilbert nodding by the dying fire, chin on his breast. For a moment Molly stared at him earnestly. He was worn and frayed, and his sprouting dark beard gave him a haggard look, but he had been faithful to his task—Henriks lay sleeping peacefully.

When the girl laid fresh sticks on the fire and blew them to a blaze, Chance stirred and woke. He was stiff, and there was a strained look deep in his eyes. Coffee refreshed him, and for breakfast they finished the remains of the roasted birds. The light strengthened as they finished. Chance said, ominously quiet: "Take a look outside."

Scrambling up, Molly turned toward the open, only to halt at the cave mouth.

"What on earth!"

The sagging branches of the spreading cedar outside might have been masked in glittering white silver. The sage clumps were glassy mounds. Beyond, the rocky canon world lay glinting and flashing in steely armor. It was an amazing transformation from the dull red of the previous day. Even the few tortured and beaten tufts of grass seemed spun of frozen metal.

"It rained again during the night, and froze," Chance spoke behind her. "Real old-fashioned ice storm."

THE SPECTACLE excited Molly strangely. A desert dweller all her days, she had never seen its like before. Yet she knew instinctively how dangerous it was. When Gilbert pulled his hat on and picked up his rifle, her color fled from her cheeks.

"Chance—you can't go out in this! You'll kill yourself on those slippery rocks!"

He stood before her loosely, a smile on his lips. "We've got to eat, Molly. You look after Henriks, and I'll see to it."

"You're not going out to hunt!" she accused him flatly. "You are thinking of those men—and my horses....You know I appreciate your purpose; but I can't permit it! Chance, you'll never reach the bottom of the canon...Give this mad plan up! The ice will melt. Later it will be safe. What could you do with a broken leg?" she pleaded, reading the stern, unyielding set of his face. "Wherever they are, the horses cannot move in this. Nor the men. Please do as I ask and stay here!"

Sweet as he found her solicitude,

Chance remained adamant. But he paid her the compliment of abandoning evasion. "You've hit it, Molly. That's just the point. They won't be lookin' for me. It'll make my job a lot easier." He turned at the cave entrance and vouchsafed her a last twisted smile, somewhat wistful, but unwavering. "So long." There was a harsh brittle crunching under his step, a sliding scrape, and he was gone.

CHAPTER XI

For Keeps

WHEN GILBERT left the cave high in the canon cliff it was a glittering, frozen, hostile world into which he stepped. Not a square inch of naked rock, save the perpendicular walls of beetling cliffs everywhere facing him, but lay encased in ice; every foot was treacherous. Gravity was his unremitting enemy on every tilting slope.

No thought of game or hunting lay in his mind as he set out. He had been honest with Molly in that. The girl's stolen horses were his first concern this morning. To strike swiftly and surely. Were he and Molly to remain where they were, the horse-thieves would eventually ferret out their hiding place. Chance knew of old that the best possible defense lay in a bold attack.

His immediate problem was to descend into the canon. Any man might have drawn back before such an understaking; certain death awaited the first unwary movement. But Gilbert gave little heed to the wild unflung maze of ice-coated granite about him, narrowing his attention to each careful step. He was able, by a reckless, chamois-like progress of balancing and sliding, to advance a considerable distance down the slope into the gloomy rift slashing the canon wall. At a steeper place he was forced to chip niches for his feet. Only the precarious grip of his spurs enabled him to use these. Slowly he worked his way downward.

From constant contact with the ice, the metal of his carbine grew freezing to the touch and he soon drew on his riding gloves. His breath was a white plume in the crisp still air. The astringent, aromatic odor of creosote brush and cedar, constant in that country, this morning was completely absent; the breath he drew into his lungs tasteless. The utter silence, except for the sound of his chipping, the falling tinkle of icy fragments, was that of a dead and abandoned world.

At length Chance found himself in the rocky cleft. The walls pinched in. Only a few yards of gray overcast sky showed overhead. The bare rock of the rough walls aided his descent materially; but not always. At the long slope up which Henriks had been dragged by means of the rope, Chance paused in thoughtful study. Steep as it was, under a slick, rock-hard glaze, it presented a puzzle. His steadfast gaze riveted on the bottom, Chance sat on his heels and slid forward with dizzy speed, his spurs raking a parallel double scratch in the ice with a rasp like tearing canvas. At the foot of the slide he slammed sidewise into a boulder. While leaving him numb and momentarily groggy, at the same time the blow checked his downward momentum. By throwing his arms around a second rock he succeeded in halting his reckless career. From there on it was a matter of only a nasty fall or two, though desperately hard work. Despite the bitter chill Chance reached the bottom damp with perspiration.

"Reckon I'm just as well off without a horse today," he mused wryly, looking back up the way he had come. By no means in his power could he have retraced his course before a rising temperature should have relaxed the icy grip on the hills.

MASKED BY THE drooping, crackling brush, Chance surveyed minutely the outspread canon floor. There was no sign of life or movement. The great size of this amphitheater, where the canon forked, emphasized its complete abandonment to austere nature. Yet

Gilbert moved out on the long slope with circumspection. The slope posed its own vexed problem. It cost him an hour to work down into the frozen wash to a point opposite the canon fork. Long as he gazed, however, he made no attempt to proceed that way. Instead he followed the main canon for half a mile until he came to a narrow split, known as a chimney, gashing the unflung face of the wall. It was dark in there, so pinched and tortuous in places that a man could scarcely force his body through; moreover, it look a long fifteen minutes to reach the foot of the gash.

The wriggling, crawling upward climb was unexpectedly easy until, near the top, he ran into the ice once more. Somehow he won out and lay panting beside a low ledge which protected him from observation. Here he removed his spurs. He was atop a high rocky island, narrow and long. A few yards away the craggy rim of the fork dropped off; and somewhere across from his position was the spot from which the outlaw had fired when he shot Henriks. Since his object clearly had been to turn back anyone attempting to enter the fork, it was reasonable to suppose he was still at his post—unless Chance's surmise was wholly mistaken and the band had thrust on with their booty, in which event they were miles away by now at a lower altitude, and beyond the clutch of the ice storm.

Crawling across rock toward the yawning fork, Gilbert was careful not to reveal himself. At last he neared the canon's edge. Cautious scrutiny from covert behind a low, crumbling sandstone spire failed to reveal any sign of the lookout across the chasm. Chance suspiciously studied every shadow and fold for yards along the opposite rim without avail. For twenty minutes he awaited some betraying, unguarded movement over there. The stillness stretched unbroken. Crawling to the edge, Chance gazed over and down. Crags stood out from the broken wall, festooned in ice; but he descried no armed man crouching behind any of them. Still he remained unsatisfied. Strong and unmistakable to his keen senses came the feel of danger.

AFTER A further wait the carbine rose slowly to his shoulder, hesitated there, then settled against his lean cheek. Not immediately did he fire, for vagrant thoughts connected with the probable result of the crashing echo it would arouse flitted through his mind. It was on a protruding glassy crag of ice far down the opposite wall that he trained his sights. Deliberately he squeezed the trigger. The startling crash banged back and forth hollowly in the forlorn depths; the ice-crag disintegrated abruptly, to tinkle and jangle downward, fragments skating and bouncing far down the slope into the gulf below.

The response was almost instantaneous. A second rifle exploded with a hollow roar, its ringing echoes mingling with those of Chance's carbine. Chance froze and lay hearkening intently—trying to determine through the baffling interplay of sound, the point from which the second shot had been fired. It proved a futile effort. His experiment, however, had proved one thing at least. His hunch had been good—a lookout was still concealed somewhere in the rocks; the outlaws had not moved on. Whoever lay in hiding, with rifle ready, had been surprsed into firing instantly at the first flicker of movement down in the canon; for more chips and chunks leaped out and went gaily bouncing and gliding.

To Gilbert this argued the other man was on the same rim as himself, perhaps only a few yards distant. He had no means of making sure, and uncertainty drew his nerves fine. For a long three minutes he lay motionless, scarcely breathing, his brain alive with tense speculation. His own position was clear. He must locate the hidden outlaw, and he must see him first. Something told him there would be no quarter given or expected.

His thoughts were interrupted by the abrupt faint sound of a scraping boot. It spurred Chance to action. For long minutes he had lain motion-

less where he was; a slick wetness under him as he peeped palely through the clouds at that moment; it was soaring higher; already the early morning crispness had moderated. Wet ice would be doubly treacherous. To add to that, the sparkling glitter under the sun's diffused glare would dazzle the eyes and make quick calculation of distances uncertain. These considerations flicked through his mind, then were banished as every faculty thinned to vigilance.

ON HANDS and knees Chance peered this way and that hurriedly along the icy rim. At first he could see nothing. Humps and icy rocks, broken dykes and ledges, offered cover and confusion on every hand; there were a hundred places where a man might conceal himself. Suddenly, Gilbert caught a floating movement out of the corner of his eye. His head jerked round. On the instant he saw a dark-clad man emerge from the protection of a boulder thirty feet away. The man's rifle was gripped at waist height, ready for action. He spied Chance's head and back. Caught as he was in an awkward crouch, Chance saw all this with fateful clearness. His own rifle was flat on the ice before him; to raise it and swing the muzzle would comsume precious seconds. Chance did not attempt the impossible. With a lunge, he sprang up, hand clawing at the Colt in his holster as his gauntlet went flying.

Arrested, eyes glaring, the outlaw threw up his weapon. He scarcely waited to draw a bead—or needed to, blazing away at almost point-blank range. He failed to reckon on the treacherous footing, however. Even as he fired, Chance's feet flew out from under him with a rasp and he felt himself going. It did not prevent him from flashing the .45 out, and he let drive as he was falling. He felt the wicked buzzing flutter of the outlaw's slug, which flew past a few inches from his head. His own was not so wild. He saw the renegade throw up his hands and go over backward. The next Chance knew he collided with the icy rock with a shock that nearly jarred him loose from his senses. But not quite. He was on his knees again in a twinkling, teeth bared, his gun at the ready. And then he knew there was no further need for haste.

Bending down over the outlaw who tried to kill him, a minute later, Chance scanned his features narrowly. "I've seen this bird before. Where was it—at Bonanza Belt? Robshaw's mine?...That's him!" He noted the small ragged hole in the man's throat, and the corners of his mouth drew down. "Plumb center," he murmured. He started to thrust the six-gun in his holster, only to pause and look the gun over with slitted eyes.

"Old Bodine was right," he soliloquized. According to the tale, the gun had done bloody execution in its time. Here was one more example of its work. Even while a chill went down his spine, every instinct in him rose against ignorant superstition. No sense in the old ghost yarn, of course! Redfield the Rustler had long since molded in the grave—his bone-handled six-gun a gun and nothing more. Gilbert grinned sourly, remembering the remainder of the prophesy.

"Sooner or later, every man who carries the gun'll kill somebody with it. If he don't git shut of it quick, he'll git killed himself!"

Those had been old Bodine's words—the words of a broken-down, doddering old soak. Any man who placed credence in such idle maundering was a fool. With that thought Chance shrugged and sheathed the gun.

HASTILY gathering up the outlaw's rifle and retrieving his own, he did not make the mistake of carelessly exposing himself. No telling how far away this man's friends might be; nor did Chance need any reminder that after this killing, it was war now to the hilt.

His first consideration still was Molly's horses; and while only investigation could prove him right or wrong, he believed he knew where he could find them. This was by no means the first occasion on which

he had penetrated these remote canons. As he had told Molly, he had hazed cattle out of their brooding recesses and knew the throw of the land. Two or three miles up the branch canon a rocky defile led to a hidden walked-in valley. Chance had camped there once. A well-concealed spot, discovered only by accident, and affording both feed and water in abundance, it would make an admirable cache for thieves attempting to run stock out of the country. Chance believed the horse-thieves knew of it, and he meant to reconnoiter the place before turning back.

The gray canopy of the cloud-bank was swiftly breaking up under the onslaught of the warming sun. Only scudding shreds of vapor remained. The temperature of the air was rising fast. It was almost balmy spring again, and it wrought havoc on the sheathing of ice which covered everything. Rills had formed on every sloping rock; miniature cascades poured off the cliffs; the ice underfoot crackled and broke under Chance's cautious step. First he had to get down into the canon, and, carrying the rifles, he addressed himself in the task. He soon found a boulder-choked crevice down which it was possible to inch his way. He began to work up the canon, clinging to the shaded side, despite the treacherous footing; and he kept a sharp lookout. But there was no movement in the dead world of rock. A mile slipped by, another. Chance had long since cached the outlaw's rifle, preferring to depend, despite its lighter caliber, on his own. He was moving more slowly now, watching the ragged rims. As last a dark crevice on the left-hand side, a mere notch, showed against the blue. He made toward it, threading the rocky detritus; and with every step his caution was redoubled.

Rather to his surprise there was no evidence of a lookout at the mouth of the shadowy cleft splitting the rock wall, or in its throat. Chance crept through, every sense cocked to hair-trigger keenness. At the end of a hundred yards the confining walls began to fall away, and still there was no warning alarm. But the blood beat in his bronze throat at sight of recent horse-droppings on the weathered rocks. Men had passed that way. Chance stole on.

Long as it had been since he was there last, he had not remembered how wildly beautiful the valley was when it opened out before his gaze. Hemmed in by a sheer precipice to the west and rounded off by unscalable walls, it was in reality a box-canon, with a thread of creek from granite springs at the upper end. From where Chance stood just within the gateway the valley floor lay outspread a hundred feet below; willows overhung the brook, a few cottonwoods flourished; on the gentle slopes sprawled cedar and pinon groves. Studying this mountain paradise over the brow of a rock, Chance saw no human figure anywhere, but a thin blue pillar of smoke crawled skyward, clear against the ruined stone.

His movements displaying neither haste nor hesitation, he did not descend into the valley but set out along the lower slope. Hawklike, his gaze swept the broad reaches below as he proceeded. Ten minutes brought him to a point overlooking a small, cuplike depression in the center of a pinon grove. He halted, electrified, and a deep exclamation of satisfaction escaped his thin lips.

"Ah-h—!"

Down there in the hollow, standing hip-shot or with heads hung low in a doze of contentment under the warm spring sun, plain and unmistakable, were Molly's horses.

CHAPTER XII

In The Cache

AN INCREDIBLE rough ledge and long, broken slope led down to the pinon grove. Gilbert clung to cover where he was able during that sliding descent. One broad patch lay open to view from every quarter, and before essaying it he scrutinized the surroundings

sharply. But nothing would have effectively halted him now. Soon he was entering the pinons, with their sharp, fresh tang and fragrance. With long swift strides he made toward the hollow. Near its rim he checked his impetuous advance. No one challenged him. There appeared no one on guard there. Pushing through the last fringe of resinous branches, he scanned the bottom of the hollow. Except for the horses it was deserted.

Probably the outlaw's camp lay farther down the slope near water, where the thread of smoke still rose into the still air. Chance pictured the the men lying about the camp, either awaiting the arrival of someone, or for the passage of time. If his original count had been correct they were three in number—long odds, but it did not matter. There was one thing to be done and he set about this without delay.

The horses turned their heads to look at him as he neared. Circling them, he made for the only gap in the tree-encircled cup. And once there he made certain that, due to outcropping rocks, the only clear path lay straight down the slope. He could not avoid the stock-thieves. Turning back, Chance shrugged. If it were impossible thus to save a little trouble, then he would not bother himself.

Quietly he herded the horses together and started them moving. At the gap he swung astride a sturdy bay. There was only the horse's dangling halterstring to grasp in case of need, but he would not pause for a better arrangement. With the animals moving at a walk he rode near their head; and once through the rocky gap he turned them toward the right, allowing them to string out and loaf along. Grazing horses were wont to scramble about in rough country in search of better feed. Were one of the outlaws to hear them moving at this leisurely pace without spying him, Gilbert still stood a good chance of winning clear. But the throw of the land forced him steadily down the slope. Pushing through an opening in the pinons, he came abruptly on a sight that made him clamp a hard grip on himself.

The trail had led him almost directly to the outlaw camp. As he broke into the open one of the stock-thieves was squatting on his heels before the fire; a second was bending over a canvas pack; while the third, lying stretched at full length on an outspread blanket, turned on a propped elbow at the sound of thudding hoofs. Chance recognized this man instantly. He was Dave Cullers, the reckless El Castra gun-slinger. For a long moment he lay rigid, staring, too surprised by sight of Gilbert to cry out. In that frozen second Chance grasped his opportunity. Slapping the bay smartly, he kicked out toward the horses on either side of him. With frightened snorts the animals flung up their heads and sprang forward — and the remaining horses, quick to catch the contagion, broke into motion with them, the entire band lunging in a wild lumbering run straight toward the camp.

THE RECUMBENT outlaw's amazed yell rang out a warning. The other two whirled. They were barely in time to see the horses bearing down on them, hoofs lashing the air, wild eyes glaring. They stood dumbfounded. Though Gilbert carried his carbine pressed against his side, ready for the first threatening move, not one of them appeared to think of his own gun. Not a single shot was fired. The next moment, the running horses were on them. Had there been space they might at the last minute have swerved aside. But the shouldering pinons held them to their course. The stock-thieves sprang this way and that in a panic. Too late! Cullers, in the midst of a crouching leap, was struck by a flying hoof and sent rolling and tumbling. There came a metallic clatter as packs, utensils, and all the appurtenances of the camp were smashed beyond recognition under the pounding hoofs—a clamor which only added to the speed of the horses. Then they were past, and down the slope, breaking into the open. Fortunately the glaze of ice had completely dis-

appeared under the early afternoon sun, and Gilbert allowed them to run without check. He swung lithely astride the bay, to gaze back up the slope. Little was to be seen. One of the outlaws stumbled up, limping, to stare after. There was no sign of the other two.

"That's somethin' for 'em to think over," Chance muttered grimly.

A moment later a flying slug tore the brush at one side with raking slash, and the *crang-g* of a high-powered rifle echoed off the cliffs. Gilbert was not surprised. He had been expecting such a reprisal. Working to the rear of the band, he shoved the horses along without let-up. The outlaw fired again, and then a third time. Chance did not hear those slugs strike. Gradually the horse herd won across the low floor of the valley. They slowed as they climbed toward the gap in the towering red rocks. Again and again the outlaw fired, the echoes pounding across the open like hammer blows. His efforts were futile. The horses toiled on, their hoofs ringing like bells as they clattered into the rocky gap.

Only then did Chance pause to look back. He had no idea how badly the horse-thieves were banged up. At no time had he seen their saddle horses. But he did not overlook the possibility of imminent pursuit.

THREADING the gap and working through rock-fanged ledges, the horses drove steadily down-canon, Chance keeping a wary watch to the rear. These cold-blooded work horses were large, ungainly, and there was no speed in them. To Chance their pace seemed snail-like as they drove through the long brush-clumped tangents at a lumbering gait. At every bend he expected to perceive pursuing dots far behind. Nothing of the kind occurred.

Ice was a thing of the past when he reached the canon forks. This was an afternoon in late spring; though he knew early fall would return swiftly at sunset, with a sharp drop in temperature. His problem now was a safe hiding-place in which to leave the horses; but passing opposite the huge cave in the cliffs, he spared a thought for Molly, looking toward the spot where she was hidden. He could discern the cave's dark mouth through the crags, the sheltering cedar identifying it; the girl herself was not in evidence. Proceeding, Chance shifted his attention to rents and clefts gashing the canon wall. A mile below the forks he found a narrow recess which appeared satisfactory, and he herded the horses up the slope toward it. The flood-scarred slope was long; the heavy horses labored upward with agonizing slowness. At the top, near the foot of the wall, Chance paused to look back with sharp glance. He saw nothing to rouse his suspicions. If the outlaws were in pursuit they had not yet put in an appearance.

MAKING for the cleft originally selected, he halted before another, nearer, and unseen until he was almost upon it. One keen glance and he made up his mind swiftly. The gap ran back into the rocky wall for a considerable distance, widening. Across its mouth lay the drying peeled poles of a rickety gate. "Some waddy's fixed up a corral here to hold a handful of cows while he hunted for more," Chance soliloquized. The poles would quickly solve one of his problems at least. Hazing the horses into the dark opening, Chance slid off the sweat-stained bay and lodged the poles securely across the mouth of the gully. Stepping back, he surveyed his handiwork critically. The horses could not get out. Rifle in hand, he swung back toward the canon.

Keen scrutiny of its upper reaches assured him that he had been in time. The prospect lay empty, silent. With long strides he made his way down the slope to the opposite slant and climbed up to its crest, where his progress was covered by thick brush. Then he set out for the cave.

Molly was sitting on a rock beside the gnarled cedar when he climbed out of the massive crevice. Her face was stamped with anxious concern and her eyes were shadowed; hands gripping the rock in unmistakeable

tension. Her features lit up at sight of Gilbert. She sprang up, warmth in her manner.

"Chance, I thought you would never come—"

"What's wrong?" he countered swiftly. "Is it Henriks?"

"No. No worse. I think the fever is dying down. But, Chance, I'm afraid for him—I don't like his looks. If we don't get him to a doctor quickly he....may not live." In her quavering tone Chance read the ordeal she must have endured throughout the day. Henriks probably had struggled and raved. Gilbert mentally accused himself of having abandoned her to this rough experience; but time had laid him under a remorseless compulsion.

The fire was dead, but afternoon light filled the cavern. Kneeling beside the wounded man, Chance looked him over. Gust was pallid and his festures looked sunken. With great care Chance removed the bandages and examined his wounds. Both had nicely closed. While he did not subscribe to Molly's fears, it seemed advisable to get Henriks into competent hands without any great and continuing delay. Even with the horses available, Chance had no notion how to accomplish this. It would be impossible for the two of them to lower Henriks to the canon floor without reopening his wounds. Chance sat on his heels and pondered gravely. Molly stood restlessly at his shoulder for a moment before turning back to the cave mouth, from where she gazed down into the gloomy canon long and thoughtfully. When she spoke at last it was so calmly that the sense of her words did not immediately register on his consciousness.

"Someone is coming," she said.

CHANCE snapped back to alertness, suddenly aware of how weary he was. If the outlaws had trailed him there he would face new and even more rigorous demands. Stumbling to the cave entrance, he peered downward, cheeks lean and taut. He saw the tiny dwarfed figures of men and horses on the canon floor, a dark moving cavalcade, Oblique rays of sunshine, turning golden, made clear vision difficult. But after a long, motionless moment he relaxed.

"They're comin' up-canon," he announced. "I ain't so sure but one of 'em is Dane Hardwick.... Sure it is! I can tell that pinto of his."

Catching the communicated hope of this discovery, Molly stepped forward. Excitement brought a flush to her cheeks.

"It is! And the one with him—why, it's Larry Robshaw! I don't know the others.... Chance, someone reported the wagons, and they're coming after us!" Her voice thrilled, then sobered. "They'll have passed far on before we can reach them."

For answer Chance drew his six-gun and fired two spaced shots into the air. The flat cracks echoed across to far wall and back, seemingly magnifed in volume; and they threw the men below into hasty action. They whirled about, gazing this way and that. Chance waved his Stetson in great sweeps against the sky. Hardwick finally spied him and pointed. The men below made for the steep crevasse gashing the canon wall, and topping the lower slopes, passed from sight.

It would be twenty minutes before they would arrive clambering up through the rocks. Waiting, Chance fell prey to a strange unrest. There seemed many things he had wanted to say to Molly; of a sudden they had lost something which they held in common; but diffidence sealed his lips. She too remained silent, her face remote. Watching her covertly, he felt that her first excitement was gone. He dared not conjecture as to the cause. She had worries enough ahead of her to justify sober second thought.

Larry Robshaw was the first to thrust his head above the rocky slope. The lanky sheriff was hard behind him. From their actions they might not have seen Gilbert advancing with questing eyes fastened on Molly. One good look at her, and Robshaw began to glow with a pleasure at variance with his hard, polished, cynical exterior.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed heartily. "You look okay, if a bit battered....What on earth happened, Molly girl?"

"Larry, you're a godsend! There was complete, frank trust in her tone as well as a creditable attempt at nonchalance. "But even you can be too late, my friend....Gust was held up on the road, and my horses stolen—cut from the traces and driven off! Gust followed on foot. Chance and I overtook him. We got too close—Gust was shot....He's here in the cave, poor boy."

Hardwick's shaggy brows drew down. "What this?" he demanded, his tone deepening. "Ain't dead, is he?"

"No. But I'm afraid he's near it. We got him up here for protection—and then had no horses to get him out to a doctor. Our own were shot from under us."

"We picked up your saddles down the wash....And I located your freight-teams," put in Robshaw shortly. Molly stared.

"My horses?....Where?"

"In a corral across the canon—"

MOLLY TURNED to look at Chance, who met her eyes and then nodded. She turned back.

"You mean they are—near here?"

"Sure thing." Robshaw was almost too laconic. "Walk out along the rim here a ways, and you can see them." He broke off to ask further questions about her adventure, a hard insistence riding him. Manifestly both he and Hardwick were weighing the affair carefully. Chance abruptly understood their studied ignoring of himself, and his lips tightened in a mirthless smile.

Robshaw turned to him finally, still speaking to Molly. "Why didn't your friend—er—Gilbert here, start out for help this morning?" he inquired with velvet smoothness.

"He was thinking of the horses, of course," she responded swiftly. "The ice would have made travel impossible anyhow—"

"Ice?" they echoed incredulously. "What ice?" And hearkened while Molly told of the storm which had glazed the hills for a few hours.

"Wal, what d'yuh know?" marveled Hardwick drawlingly, at the end. "The weather shore plays hell with stock-thieves, don't it?"

"Just who were these hold-up men?" queried Robshaw deliberately. He awaited the answer with interest. Molly glanced at Chance, who shrugged.

"I can name one. And at least one other doesn't matter any more—"

"He don't hey?" Hardwick barked. "Why don't he?"

"Because he's dead."

That jarred them. "Yuh mean you plugged him, Gilbert?" Dane queried. Chance nodded.

At this juncture two men appeared down the slope. Seeing the group in discussion before the cave, they came no farther, sinking down to rest. After an abstracted glance at them Hardwick nodded assent.

"You saw him close?"

"I rode him down," was the brief answer.

"When was this?" queried the lawman, finding it increasingly difficult to conceal his astonishment.

"Three hours ago—maybe a little more."

Dane shook his head. He glanced meaningfully at Robshaw.

"It won't wash, Gilbert," he said with heavy severity. "Yuh know altogether too much 'bout some of this business, an' nothin' about the rest! Things are too pat....Yuh had yore hawss shot from under yuh, yet yuh claim yuh plugged one owlhoot—from ambush, I s'pose? Yuh know who these birds are; even rode one of 'em down. With no bronc!" Sarcasm rang clear in his tone. "After tryin' for days to put her out of business, yuh been huntin' Molly's stolen hawses—and we find 'em less than a mile from here. Where was you lookin'?...Why don't yuh give it up an' admit yuh either stole them hawses yoreself, or had it done?"

CHAPTER XIII

The Western Way

CHANCE SHOT Hardwick a quick look, and then displayed masterly annoyance at the unheralded accusation.

"Look, Hardwick. Maybe it's your questions you've got wrong end to—"

"I'll take care of that," snapped Dane irately. Chance waved a silencing hand.

"This is all foolishness," he insisted. "I *did* have my pony shot. And I did plug one horse-thief—and run down another. Don't forget my witnesses!....There's Molly here, for one. If you can catch up with Dave Cullers he'll vouch for bein' run down—probably prove it by comin' at me with a gun. There's a third witnes across the canon. A dead one. Would a man shoot one of his own crowd?... As for Molly's horses," he concluded in the same level, controlled voice, "you found them where you did because I put them there less than an hour ago."

"That's what I been sayin' all along," rejoined Hardwick hardily.

Instead of flaring up in heat, Gilbert grinned suddenly. "Dane, you're a damned old die-hard. I don't need to tell you you're barkin' up the wrong tree....Why do yuh go throwin' these crazy charges right and left? I've seen you do the same thing before, for no better reason. Pure dang bull-headedness!" he declared boldly.

Hardwick shook his head soberly. "Mebby I do it because I git things that way I can't git any other way," He returned sourly, as if not particularly liking what he had elicited this time. "We've heard Molly's story. What I think still fits into it ....But suppose yuh give us yore version, Gilbert, an' let us decide for ourselves?"

Chance recounted his experiences as they had occurred, omitting only the series of clashes with Gust Henriks. The sheriff listened attentively. He nodded dryly at the end.

"That's better'n I expected of yuh," he commented. "An' it can be checked easy enough. Our first move is to look Henriks over an' do somethin' about him." He moved into the cave as he spoke and they followed. Somewhat to the surprise of all, the swamper was conscious.

"Get me out of this, Sheriff," he whispered, deep-sunk eyes unwavering. Hardwick had the good sense not to quiz him then.

"Shore," he said soothingly. "Sit tight, boy. We'll have yuh to a doctor in short order."

"Got to be careful of his wounds," put in Chance quietly. "It's the only reason I didn't try to get him down through the rocks myself."

"Should've thought of that when yuh brought him up yere," grumbled Hardwick. He examined Henriks thoroughly, however, and grunted. "He'll stand it if we go easy."

PREPARATIONS were made for moving the wounded man. Poles were cut in a gully farther along the ridge; a stretcher was devised with the blankets. The Dane was cautiously rolled onto it and carried carefully down the slope. Where the rocks began, the waiting men were called into use. Chance looked them over sharply as they came up. He had thought these men part of a posse gathered by Hardwick. But one was a man he had seen working about Robshaw's ore-dump in Bonanza Belt; and the other appeared to be a teamster. Chance shrugged.

Late afternoon was filling the canon with purple veils. None paid any attention to time, their one concern being to lower Gust into the canon with the least amount of jarring discomfort consistent with safety. Even with five men it proved incredibly difficult; for at one end the flimsy stretcher had to be awkwardly lowered, and the other end held high to preserve a reasonable level. At the slick-rock slide no expedient served save for Gilbert to pick up Henriks in his arms and lower himself and his burden with extreme care hand-

over-hand down a strung rope. Before reaching the bottom every man was wringing wet, and unmercifully chafed. When they came out on the slope below the sun was a red ball notched in a far western range, the vault of the sky shaded from coppery pink to apple-green.

During the descent Chance's shrewd estimate of the two strangers' status proved justified. Robshaw spoke to both familiarly and often; at the bottom he gave them instructions to ride to the cache and bring back a couple of horses. The two mounted and jogged away, having said little or nothing throughout.

The men returned toward dusk with the desired horses; and Chance amused himself by noting they were not the same two. Clearly Hardwick had ridden into the hills in force. Molly was overjoyed to see her horses, and to know the remainder were waiting and safe. She made much of them.

"Now I have only Gust, and my stranded wagons, to worry about," she exclaimed.

"Then you can stop at Henriks," smiled Robshaw. "Your wagons are taken care of, Molly. They're being hauled to Benson and dumped."

The girl gazed at him through misty eyes. "What a friend you are, Larry," she managed uncertainly. "You think of everything."

Too much the gentleman to brush this gratitude aside, Robshaw pretended to busy himself with other concerns. Indeed he had thought of everything. The new arrivals brought with them a pack-horse bearing food. It had been Robshaw's idea.

"Fine. We'll eat first," said Hardwick. "Then Henriks better get started down the wash. Larry, Miss Molly an' one of the boys can go long with 'im. Me an' Gilbert an' the rest'll find a spot to camp. In the mornin' we'll comb the hills."

THIS PLAN was discussed while the meal was being prepared. It did not escape Chance that his opinion was not solicited. These men had adopted toward him a strict neutrality; they neither included nor wholly ignored him. His lips curled in a wry smile as he read the reason. Circumstantial as it was, his story was accepted strictly on the basis of necessity. Chance had no quarrel with that. It was the custom of the country.

Supper having been hastily consumed, the wounded man was made for travel, his stretcher slung between a pair of Molly's placid, steady horses. There would be places impossible to negotiate by means of this rig; Gust would have to be removed and carried. It was bound to prove a rough trip,. But Molly was anxious on the wounded man's account, and Robshaw thought they would manage. Hardwick promised to drive out the rest of Molly's horses when he came. The stars were blinking by the time all was in readiness. Before swinging up on the broad back of one of the sturdy work-horses, Molly accosted Gilbert.

"Why don't you come with us, Chance?" she questoned. "You were dragged into this. It's been hard; you must be worn out. Surely there's no further need for you to keep on shouldering my troubles?"

Chance felt the sheriff's waiting silence; the stolid pressure of these men's wills. They would not let him go. It left him unmoved. He shook his head briefly."

"I'll see it through, ma'am. In fact I want to. The truth is, I'm involved myself, now."

She protested no further, mounting up. Robshaw spoke to the horses. They moved off, to be swallowed up in the gloom. Soon even the beat of the horses' hoofs was lost in the silent, enveloping night.

"Wal, that's that," grunted Hardwick. "We'll split the grub in that pack an' roll in on our cantles. That'll leave the pack-hawses free. Gilbert can ride one."

Chance grinned. No likelihood of his forcing a getaway on that broken-down, wind-broken old mare! "Not taking any chances of losing me, are you Dane?" he chuckled mirthlessly.

"Why should I?" retorted Hardwick unemotionally.

Once mounted, they set off up-canon in the dim starlight. It was a

short ride to the point in the main canon from which Chance said he had climbed up the wall before shooting the outlaw on the rim. They stopped under the wall, looming blackly above them. Here the lawman proposed to encamp.

"But, Dane, the top can be reached easier from the fork," argued Chance mildly. "We may be able to cut 'em off, too, if them owlhoots happen still to be up in there."

"Just let me manage this business," suggested Hardwick curtly.

Gilbert offered no more. A fire was kindled in a niche in the wall. The possemen, of whom there were three, produced a greasy pack of cards and wrangled amiably among themselves. Grown tired of watching, Chance crawled into the pack trap and promptly slept. He awoke more than once to awareness of quiet and stealthy movement, but gave no heed. He had known he would be watched closely. In the steely dawn it struck him that Hardwick was unconscionably deliberate.

"Come on, come on," urged Chance roughly. "Let's get this over with!"

Dane vouchsafed him a hostile stare.

THEY CLIMBED the identical chimney up which Chance had clambered. Frost powdered the canon floor below them when they looked back; cloudy gray mist wreathed the rocks; there was a sting in the air. The sun flashed over the upper world as they climbed out on top. Chance led the way unhesitatingly to the scent of the gun-fight.

"There's where I laid on the ice," he pointed. "Ought to find my empty shell layin' here somewhere." They hunted for it without success. Chance tossed a hand. "No matter. It may've rolled over the edge."

"Where was this other hombre?" queried Hardwick.

"Yonder." Chance indicated the spot.

"Show me just where."

To Gilbert's surprise, the vanquished outlaw no longer lay where he had fallen. For a moment he could not even locate the exact spot, and he looked about, silent.

"Come on, come on, Gilbert!" ordered Hardwick sternly. Chance only shook his head.

"Those other gents came after him and toted him off, of course," he said slowly, uncertain as to just how to meet this new development. "I can't even find where he laid. It looks different here now—rocks moved around, or something."

One of the dour possemen guffawed humorlessly. "Yuh reckon the corpse got up an' rolled 'em?" was his harsh jibe.

Chance was shocked to stillness by this open contempt. He whirled on the man. "No, I don't reckon it was the corpse," he snarled with sudden, tearing ferocity. "I'm as well aware as you are how much it might mean to somebody to cover up that blood-spot....Just walk wide an' talk small, mister man, till you aim to decorate one of them things yourself—because I can accommodate you!"

"Hyar!" Hardwick came raging forward to thrust himself before Chance, interposing his rugged frame between the two. "Go easy, Gilbert! Yuh ain't doin' so well yoreself," he warned. "Draggin' us up an' down these cliffs while yore pals light a shuck!"

Chance eyed him with naked scorn. "Don't take me for a fool, Dane! Nobody but you would've dealt me into this mess in the first place; you've got me already convicted, and hung! I'm takin' time to prove how wrong you are—but I'll strip the hide off any ranny that plays horse with me!"

He turned to stride rapidly back and forth, scanning the rocks. Suddenly he stopped. "Look here!" He kicked aside a flat stone, disclosing a dark blot. "That's blood! Some may've washed away in that meltin' ice; but there's more here—plenty—if we take time to hunt!"

Hardwick stared at the spot with a dubious shake of head, rasping his stubbly jaw. "No mistakin' that," he conceded grudgingly. "Somethin' went on here an' that's a fact. Damned if I savvy what!"

Chance snorted: "I told you what went on, you blame thick-head.... Still tryin' to make the facts fit your notion of what occurred—whether they do or not!"

Dane went fiery red, and his breathing thickened. For an instant he stood frozen.

"Keep a civil tongue in yore head, boy," he rumbled. "I'm responsible for the law in this country, an' I don't lose my wits easy. I'm overlookin' this....Go on the way yo're doin' an' yuh ain't makin' it any easier for yoreself, if what I suspect turns out to be the truth."

"Would any man talk as I do if what you suspect was the truth?" retorted Chance crisply.

HARDWICK turned away with a ruffled growl. "We'll ride to that cache up the fork an' look around," he declared, making a motion to his graven, waiting men, who shrugged and broke their taut immobility. Crossing the rocks, the group climbed down the narrow crevice to the horses. It was a bleak ride up the winding fork. Chance made no mere pretense of keeping to himself. He had grown disgusted with this business and his anger was roused. These men, so easygoing before, now so sullen and aloof, were his enemies; or if not, they acted remarkably like it.

Gilbert pointed the way into the cache and they pushed through the gap. They had espied no one on the way thither; and the mountain hollow appeared empty of life. The birds had flown. Hardwick had a keen scrutiny for everything about him. He took note of the horse-droppings; but on the flinty granite it was virtually impossible to read sign. Chance rode to the point where he had discovered Molly's horses, and showed how he emerged from the cache. Signs of a camp were unmistakable, as were other evidences of casual occupation; but there was nothing, no mark on the hard ground, no remaining battered kettle or pot, to bear out unmistakably his tale of the violent action which had taken place there.

The sheriff cleared his throat raspingly, as if coming to a conclusion. They had dismounted and were moving about the camp. Dane swung on Chance abruptly.

"Gilbert, all you say happened may have," he said flatly. "But I'll gamble it didn't. Somethin' was certainly goin' on...but there still ain't a scrap of proof them hawss-thieves weren't yore pals, workin' under yore orders, an' that yuh quarreled with 'em for some reason—"

"But, Dane," argued Chance, curbing his exasperation, "whoever they were, they got away with the horses. Why would I be fool enough to come up here with Molly?"

"You'd've wanted to make shore things was goin' all right," was the uncompromising rejoinder.

"Then who shot that owlhoot on the rocks? Whose blood was it up there? Molly saw Henriks get it at the forks. She told you that!"

"Wal, I said it ain't right clear to me." Hardwick was dogmatic. "It was mebby a mistake. Or mebby Henriks got the blackleg before he was downed."

"By a dead man?" demanded Chance mulled the facts, with hard slitted pupils. There could be no mistaking whither all this tended. He found himself facing the four men, and fell into a crouch, every muscle in his body flat and tensed. Only his eyes moved as he watched them, for his lips scarcely appeared to.

"Give it a name, Hardwick," he breathed softly.

The sheriff stood somber, and trigger-keen. "Sorry, Gilbert," he muttered gruffly. "Reckon I ain't got no choice but to relieve you of yore gun an' take yuh in."

CHAPTER XIV

Eagles Fly Alone

CHANCE SHOOK his head once, from right to left and back, and his words were even dryer, briefer, more restling, issuing from between flat lips.

"Don't try it, Dane—"

Hardwick's eyes glinted red with challenge, then dulled to steely purpose. He was as terse.

"Why not?"

"You've haven't the guts, for one thing. I'm watchin' your every move, old boy....Make a sign to your wolf-pack and I'll let you have it," Chance droned gently. "I know they're tough. They'll get me all right. But, Hardwick—you'll go with me!"

Dane's black eyes widened as he absorbed the significance of this. He knew Chance meant every word he said. It was an undeniable deterrent to violent action.

"Hell!" scoffed one of the possemen, sensing the deadlock in the sherifff's mind. "Don't swaller that guff, Dane. Leave us have 'im!"

There was the whine of wicked, deadly calculation in that rough tone. Gilbert divined the slenderness of his tenure of life. Hard-tempered, stubbornly courageous, these men would prove wild beasts in a fight. Chance could be equally ruthless. His lips writhed back in a ghastly grin.

"Call the turn, Hardwick! Look what you stand to gain!...You'll have yourself a sucker for Molly, for one thing. No need to look farther for the real thieves. Think of the votes that'll get you! Man, you'll be reelected sheriff—if you live!"

Hardwick appeared to arrive at a hard decision.

"This ain't gettin' us nowhere," he exploded vehemently, in heady wrath. "Gilbert—are yuh handin' over yore guns?"

Chance only stared at him stonily. The sheriff accepted the ultimatum.

"Okay! Then keep 'em, an' run yore risk!" He did not concede anything. Chance knew better than to suppose he feared the issue. A man without nerves, Hardwick had proven himself a lion in war. Neither more honest nor more devious than the common run of men, he was not above taking advantage of a situation like the present; but to be told bluntly that by so doing he sought to gain political capital, aroused his conscience to a full awareness of what was at stake. As Chance had shrewdly guessed, it proved more than the lawman could swallow.

THE PAUSE lengthened until one of Dane's men growled, "Aw hell!" and turned away. Chance waited, watchful, as all moved to their mounts, obviously no longer interested in himself. Shambling to the pack-horse then, he swung himself astride. Hardwick led the way out of the cache, hunched easily in the saddle, his lank face moody. Darting by like a blue bullet, a magpie screamed at them raucously as they mounted the last bench. Beyond the shadowy gap Dane drew up and sat there musingly, gazing about the lonely, shattered wilderness of majestic rocks. He was prospecting his future course, gloomy pessimism in his absent eyes; his men, somber of mien, expressing disappointment if not scorn.

Gilbert's face revealed nothing beyond the iron of his nature, but he kept these men under constant surveillance. A half mile down the fork he turned the mare aside and plunged into the rocks, to emerge presently carrying an extra rifle. Hardwick regarded this find warily.

"What's that?" he grunted.

"The dead horse-thief's carbine," returned Chance shortly. "I cached it to get rid of it."

"That's somethin'," Hardwick grumbled as he took it and looked it over. "I'll check on this, Gilbert. It's far from new. Somebody ought to reco'nize it—"

The sun stood high and ardent, golden on the dark rocks; graying the foliage. The atmosphere was taking a turn toward increased warmth. They accepted their portion with the easy indifference of range men. Arriving at the broad canon forks, they were soon afterward at the spot where Molly's horses were being held.

A lone man carrying a rifle had mounted guard at the peeled pole gate. He scanned their faces with sharp curiosity as they came up, but offered no comment. At Hardwick's orders the horses were turned out and headed down-canon. They gave

no trouble. By late afternoon the tall saguaro and increasing heat foretold that they were approaching the San Pedro valley. At the mouth of Arivaipa wash an hour later, Hardwick drew rein.

"They took Henriks on to Bonanza Belt," he began. "Reckon Molly'd want her hawses took to her barns there. I'll leave you boys finish the job; tell Molly I want to see her at El Castra on her first trip south. Got that?"

One of them assented. After a few more words Hardwick turned to Chance, his visage cast in grim lines.

"If I let yuh get away with this, Gilbert," he rumbled, "it don't mean I'm forgettin' a thing. Far as I'm concerned, yore account stands open. Yuh ain't satisfied me by a long shot; an' what's more, you'll have to work hard to do it. Don't try leavin' the valley. From what I hear, yo're tied up tight 'nough to keep yuh here all right; but I'm sayin' it anyway! An' listen to a word of warnin', boy.... Next time I ask yuh to hand over yore guns, you do it!" His dogmatic tone changed dropping to nonchalance. "That pack mare b'longs to Ed Rawles, in El Castra. Reckon yo're headin' for there?"

Chance nodded, cold of eye—still distrustful of these men. Dane turned to the others.

"Okay, boys. Git goin'." He waved toward the north. Chance watched them turn the work-horses into the Belt trail, and sat gazing after till a haze of yellow dust obscured them from sight. He had not come off with too much credit since he and Molly had discovered their theft; but it was due to him that they were being returned now—whatever Hardwick professed to believe. The knowledge left him strangely content.

THOUGH travelling the same way, the lawmen had no further thought of bearing Gilbert company, turning his horse and jogging off. Chance followed at the leisurely pace enforced by the mare. It was late afternoon when he arrived in El Castra. Leaving the horse at Rawles' livery, he repaired to the hash-house where, in meditative silence, he swept away two sizable meals under a steady flow of Leeper's leading remarks.

Emerging, a pared match-stick in his teeth, he paused briefly in the dusty street. Evening shadows from the Catalinas lay over the valley. Sammy Bodine was probably hanging around the Rimrock bar. But when Chance strolled in he was nowhere in sight. It was the same at the Red Eagle. During the ensuing hour Chance quietly prosecuted his search with no different result. Either Sammy was in temporary retirement or had gone down the valley for a day or two. Chance caught himself grinding his teeth with impatience, and shrugged the mood off. It had never been his way to take himself too seriously.

"Expect I'm pushin' on the reins at that," he vented an amused growl. "Money in his pants makes a man talk to himself, for a fact."

Running into Mitch Morrel, an old friend from the Gourd ranch in the Galiuros, he deliberately reverted to an easier indolence. Drifting down to the saloon, they shared a drink, and Mitch had to hear the tale of Chance's recent adventure. He exclaimed most over the shooting of Gilbert's Walleye horse.

"Ride out to the spread with me in the mornin'," he proposed. "I got a little grulla in my string that'll be jest the ticket. Jack Despard'll let yuh have him. I'll see the price is right."

Chance reserved decision, the memory of Molly leaving him strangely restless, incapable of any complete relaxation longer than a few hours at most. But he knew the need of a good mount. The following morning found him riding into the hills with Morrel, and at the Gourd he was able to make a deal with Despard, the rancher, for Six Bits, a pretty little mouse-gray pony which Mitch swore was without peer. This encomium Chance accepted with a grain of salt, possessed of the range-rider's reluctance to take any man's word where horses were concerned. But riding down into the valley later, he

found Six Bits a well-mannered, intelligent beast.

"Reckon you and me'll get along, little horse," he murmured. "If you find you can get used to my ornery ways."

SAMMY BODINE was still nowhere to be found when he returned to El Castra. Chance was provoked, for he meant to interview the man. Dane Hardwick eyed the trim grulla speculatively.

"Gourd bronc, hey?"

Chance nodded. "Maybe you'd be interested to know whether I bought him or not?"

Hardwick frowned this aside. "Yuh was right about one thing, Gilbert," he proffered. "Dave Cullers did a fade all right. Can't find hide nor hair of 'im."

"If I run into him I'll make him hard to find," Chance promised curtly. Hardwick passed this by also. "Where yuh headin' now?" he inquired.

"The Belt, first thing....You may be the law, Dane," said Chance unsmilingly, "but I'm interested in uncoverin' the buzzard who had those horses stolen. You hit the drill on the head there — somebody was behind that deal who didn't show when the cards were down!"

"So you're smokin' 'im out—is that it?" The sheriff's flinty gaze was unwavering.

"That's it."

"Wal—I won't say I'm copperin' yore bet," pursued Dane cagily. "But what I told yuh before still goes, boy....Watch yore step."

"You watch it," retorted Chance, in a tone of finality. Pressing the grulla's shoulders with his knees, he rode on.

He arrived in Bonanza Belt at night, but even at that hour the camp was a glow of saloons doing a brisk business. The railroad spur from San Carlos was soon to reach the mining district, and men from the tie camps and construction gangs were in town. Huge loads of lumber, supplies, and miscellaneous freight were in evidence in the darkened wagon-yards, and the hard-fisted teamsters were roistering. Lights gleamed from the mine hoists among the hills and dotted the dumps. Bonanza Belt was stirring and awakening once more.

There were a number of things Chance felt the need to inquire into, but he could do little about them tonight. To this he ascribed the persistent augmenting of his mood of restlessness. He felt an aversion to sleep through, burnt out after long hours of unremitting tension. Putting the grulla in a stable, he stepped into the street.

Making the Indian Head saloon his first stop, he had a drink and, elbow on bar, swung sidewise to look the place over. The men lining the bar were boisterous, cocky; yet Gilbert was sharply conscious of discontent with it all. That first drink had left him sour and disgruntled, and he had another. To his disgust it only increased his gloomy depression.

He thrust away from the bar impatiently. "I'll go scoutin' for Sam Bodine—dollars to doughnuts he's prowlin' the deadfalls somewheres."

But a diligent search of the gambling rooms failed to produce a glimpse of the gnarled little derelict. Perplexed, Chance began to find Bodine a more mysterious figure than ever. He made the rounds a second time, from the bridge all the way to the Mescalero at the upper end of the street, standing over against the camp's huge slag heap; and was beginning to canvass the stables, in one of which Sam might easily be sleeping off an afternoon jag, when, rounding the corner of a shed in a darkened alley, he collided head on with a hurrying form. The impact was enough to slam him against the shed, and he was about to rip out an oath, when the man who had come charging into him exclaimed sharply and scampered off up the alley.

Chance caught himself up short, and stared after the man. A moment later the hurrying figure was silhouetted against the lighted street. Gilbert's brows corrugated in a combination of astonishment and angry amusement.

"Well, I'll be damned!" escaped him in muffled accents.

For the man who had nearly knocked him down was no other than he whom Chance had so long and fruitlessly sought—it was Sammy Bodine!

CHAPTER XV

Panther Heart

A FLINTY glint appeared in Chance's eyes as Bodine faded at the mouth of the alley. Plainly the little man was bound somewhere in a hurry. Chance's deepest curiosity was at once aroused. Running down the alley with long, silent strides to its mouth, he sought to learn in which direction Sam had turned. He soon caught a glimpse of him hastening toward Main street. Chance followed after, keeping to convenient cover as much as possible, since the old man turned more than once to throw a look over his shoulder.

Reaching Main, Bodine brushed through the knots of men moving up and down the street. He passed the lighted saloons and gambling houses without pause; and as he proceeded Chance found his destination more and more of a puzzle. He was entering the district of sober business establishments, stores, supply houses and offices, now closed and dark, where fewer loiterers were to be observed. Gilbert began to ask himself if the little man had observed him and was bent on leading him on a wild goose chase, when the other's actions, conspicuously stealthy, reassured him. Bodine had stopped before a shadowy building and was peering this way and that as if seeking to escape detection in what he intended to do next. Standing behind a porch support a hundred yards away, Chance watched narrowly.

Suddenly, Bodine darted into a doorway and the dull clatter of his climbing steps could be discerned. Chance scrutinized the building as he neared, while his astonishment increased.

"Why, that's the place where Larry Robshaw has his office!" he breathed.

Reaching the door, he paused to look upward in darkness and listen. There was no further sound. After a moment's hesitation Chance set foot on the steps and crept soundlessly up. He remembered the lay-out of the building. Reaching the upper hall, he cast about. Sam Bodine had certainly succeeded in effacing himself completely. Tiptoeing down the narrow hall, Chance soon came upon a closed door round the edge of which light showed and from behind which came the low sound of men in talk. He stared at the door blankly, standing there. It was the entrance to Robshaw's office. Rocking on his heels, Chance considered swiftly He had reason to be deeply suspicious of this clandestine meeting. As to what it portended, he could gain no inkling, for the voices remained an indistinguishable murmur; yet he believed he knew well enough.

NODDING ONCE grimly to himself, he retired into a far corner of the dark hall, and there stood motionless. It was hard waiting, for eager restlessness was on him stronger than ever. His fingers itched to roll a smoke; but he dared not risk the odor of burning tobacco drifting on the still air so many hours after men on lawful business had quit the building. The musty smell of bleached, paintless woodwork was prominent. Ten minutes dragged by, to become twenty. Presently there came the muffled sound of a scraping chair. Robshaw's door swung open creaking, and into the light stepped old Bodine.

"Wal, I'll tell the boys," he said in a heckled voice, pausing in the aperture. "I can't do no more—"

"See that you do," returned the mining man's smooth, cold tone.

No further farewell was spoken. Jerking the door shut spitefully, Bodine clumped toward the stairs. Down them he banged. Watching the closed door warily, Chance stole after, but stopped at the head of the stairs. He heard Sam emerge from the doorway and go his way, yet he

did not pursue, the significance of this meeting still holding sway in his mind. A moment later he sat down on the top step to think it over.

He was still there when Robshaw's office door opened a second time and the latter stepped out. Preoccupied as he was, face heavy with thought, his roving glance descried Gilbert in the glow from the open door. In that instant Robshaw started involuntarily, then grew impassive.

"Well, Gilbert! What do you want here?" He strove to throw severity into his tone.

Chance rose slowly to lean slouching against the wall. "I'm just askin' myself what's behind your talk with Sam Bodine," he drawled colorlessly.

Robshaw scowled. "You really get around, don't you?" he commented deliberately after a pause, in harsh impersonal accents. "The last I heard, you'd borrowed a horse and ridden to El Castra with Dane Hardwick."

"Dane did aim to take me into custody," Chance admitted. "Since you bother to interest yourself. But I changed his mind, Robshaw."

"Come, come! What are you driving at, man?" Larry turned nervously back into his office as he spoke. "That's a fine attitude you take with the mine superintendent you hope to do business with!"

"You knew Hardwick intended to saddle me with stealin' Molly's horses," Chance forged on, following him, and stopping just inside the door. "You were the only one who didn't show surprise when he sprang the charge. I didn't miss that."

The blocky, square-set mining man stared at him steadily. "Just how does that hook me up with the affair?" he queried curtly.

"Don't forget that *I* know I didn't do it," retorted Chance. "Whoever was behind that job would be bound to look for a scapegoat....At least two of Hardwick's posse were men who work for you. What have they got against me? They wanted to get me the worst way—dared Dane to touch off a shoot-out, up there in the hills! All nice and legal, too, Robshaw; only it didn't work."

Robshaw's chiseled features darkened with angry blood. "Mighty slim evidence, this is," he sneered.

"Sure. But there's more....Dave Cullers, the kid gunman I bowled over up there in the horse-theives' cache, is a bosom pal of Sam Bodine!"

"Another valuable piece of information, I'm sure!"

"There's others who'll be interested, Robshaw. Sam and Cullers were both mixed up in the shootin' of Wetherby in El Castra a couple of weeks back. Dane Hardwick knows all that." A quirk twitched at the corners of Gilbert's mouth. "A gentle, playful old hombre Sammy turned out to be! Not quite so harmless as he looks."

"I still fail to see—" began Robshaw doggedly.

"Then I'll tell you. I think you had somethin' to do with that dirty business in the Galoras by dickerin' with Cullers and his mates—through Bodine!"

IF ROBSHAW'S dumbfounded amazement was not genuine it was well simulated. "Oh, that!" he grunted disparagingly, and then laughed lazily. "I get your drift quick enough, Gilbert—but it embarrasses a man more, I expect, to find his good deeds discovered, than his crimes. If you insist, I can give an explanation of old Bodine's appearing here at my office tonight. He knows my habit of working late—" he waved toward the litter of documents and blueprints spread out on the desk—"and probably took a chance on catching me here. The fact is, I've been helping the old man out with money for some months." Robshaw was speaking now with offhand matter-of-factness. "Not much, for he'd only drink it up—but enough to meet his few needs....You'll admit the old boy has few means of picking up a dollar."

"Well, he gambles—and casin' a steal now and then should pay somethin'."

"Of course," Robshaw flirted a hand indulgently, "I don't pretend to follow his activities closely. This

is rough country. Likely he learned a good many shady tricks in a lifetime of rubbing shoulders with—cowboys and toughs—"

Chance's lean, composed face had not relaxed a whit under the flow of this smooth talk. "Robshaw," he queried coolly, "what would you stand to gain by embarrassin' Molly Mulroy financially?" He watched the other's eyes narrowly, waiting for that to penetrate.

Robshaw evinced prompt anger, with flashing scornful glance. "Poppycock!" he exploded harshly. "If that's the kind of talk you came here to throw at me, get out!....Why, I've been a friend to that girl for years. Why should I do anything to hurt her?" he demanded with heat.

"Well, it don't make sense," Chance confessed. "But you appeared on the scene mighty quick, up the wash there....When I told Hardwick I'd be crazy to show up if I'd had a hand in stealin' those horses, he said I'd naturally be anxious to find out how things were goin'. That could go for you too."

"Rubbish!" ejaculated Robshaw vehemently. "Don't misunderstand me, Gilbert," he drove on. "You deserve credit for your zeal in Miss Mulroy's behalf—but I can't allow any such talk as this. You're covering up something. The best argument against your being the man who ran off those horses is the way you keep digging into the thing, tracking down every scent you lay hands on. "But," he laughed jarringly, "you're way off if you suspect me."

"Sure. I hope I am, Robshaw."

"You're being as stubborn as Hardwick now!" the latter burst out impatiently, vexation in his eyes. "I'll grant that you've got plenty of guts—throwing this at a man you planned to do business with. It testifies to your squareness, if nothin' else."

Chance nodded briefly.

"Does this mean our teamin' deal is off?" he inquired levelly.

"Come back here with the estimates and figures and I'll give you a contract tomorrow," said Roshaw instantly. "That work must be done, Gilbert, and it's up to me to see that it is. In my mind, your lack of success as a detective has nothin' to do with your ability as a teamster." He paused. "As for my boys being in Hardwick's posse, he grabbed the first men handy. Beyond that, I claim no responsibility for them or for you. Come back here with your dope when you're ready and we'll forget it."

"Good idea," Chance nodded, with no concession in his manner. "I'll be here." Opening the door, he stepped out and left the building.

"You've been listenin' to some fast talking, Chance old boy," he mused, grinning to himself. "Very superior indeed. I reckon Robshaw suspects I don't take stock in a word of it; but he had to stick to his bargain about the teamin' to make his story good. I had him there. Generous, big-hearted friend of man—that's him!" He snorted, then lapsed into sober reflection.

There could be no questioning Larry Robshaw's suave smoothness. It must have taken nerve, in the teeth of the evidence, to compliment Chance on his mistaken deductions. One piece of information Gilbert had deliberately withheld—his recognition of the horse-thief he had been forced to shoot as another of Robshaw's dubious henchmen.

"No need of crowdin' him too close till I can nail his hide to the wall. He's an eel for slidin' out of things."

BUT WHAT bothered Chance more than anything was Robshaw's status in Molly's eyes. The man knew how to create an impression and stood high with the girl. Chance had ascertained that he was a widower; undoubtedly he meant to win the girl once and for all. Unlike Gust Henriks, who was too blunderingly earnest, he stood a fair chance of succeeding.

Gilbert did not again seek Sam Bodine, whose actions tonight, all unconsciously, had told him more than he could have hoped to draw from the old man by the most adroit questioning. There was further information he desired, and intended to win from the derelict; but that could

wait. Making for the San Carlos hotel, Chance passed through the smoke-hazed office, flopping a hand to the clerk, and climbed the stairs to his old room. It was empty. After a thorough clean-up, he pulled off his clothes and crawled into bed.

It was late in the morning when he awoke. Beyond the window-frame, sunlight flushed the rims across the river. Pulling on his boots, Chance marshaled his activities for the day. Banging down the backstairs to the kitchen, he managed to wheedle breakfast from the grumbling cook; then, retiring to the now deserted office, he fell to conning figures on a few sheets of paper filched from the clerk. A ring of burnt-out cigarette stubs surrounded his chair by the time he was finished. With the papers wadded into his shirt-pocket, he set out for Robshaw's office.

Surprisingly, Robshaw was in. He met Chance with a hard, whimsical assurance, and they spent an hour over figures of their own. The articles of agreement between them were copied out in duplicate by a clerk and signed. Gilbert was to commence teaming for the Black Prince on the fifteenth of the following month, which gave him about three weeks for preparation. He stood up to leave.

"Thanks, Robshaw," he said. "This is a fair contract. I'll give satisfaction."

Larry eyed him thoughtfully, chin on chest. "Gilbert, you still think you're dealing with a crook, don't you?"

It was brazenly said. Chance shook his head curtly. "I'm signin' an agreement with a mine. This is simply a matter of business. No call to be labelin' yourself that way.'

Robshaw laughed uneasily. "Okay —have it your way. You're a determined man for a—drifting cowboy." A moment later he was engrossed in his papers.

Chance emerged to the street slowly, bemused. The mine superintendent's word had not been lost on him. "That came as a jar," he soliloquized soberly. "He's certainly been checkin' on me." Nevertheless, Robshaw's findings had been widely misleading. Two weeks ago Chance had been a drifting cowboy in fact. It was so no longer. Rolling Robshaw's words over in his mind, however, he began to see that the other realized the change in him as fully as himself.

"He knows I mean to have Molly," he reflected, with sudden conviction. "He's a fighter, too. That was his way of servin' notice that I won't get her without a fight."

He began to respect Robshaw as an antagonist. Beneath that silken exterior there was iron cruelty and implacable resolve.

CHAPTER XVI

Star Ascendant

WITH THE Black Prince contract in his pocket, Gilbert was ready to follow the same procedure with Henry Packer, of the Old Bonanza. Only the fact that the second agreement was necessary to the first lent it any urgency. Henry's terms were so niggardly as to render them profitless, or nearly so. The signing of the contract could wait.

Meanwhile there was the Copper King, about which nothing had as yet been done. Nor had Chance apprised Larry Robshaw of this failure. Nate MacAloney was a hard nut to crack; but not for a moment had Chance considered this canny Scot's refusal to come to terms as final. He knew perfectly MacAloney's reason for rejecting his advances—the protection of Molly Mulroy's welfare. What Nate did not know was that Chance's desire to take over the mine's teaming was by no means inimical to that purpose—if he could win his way with the girl. Nor could Gilbert openly acquaint him with the true situation; yet he had to get around the man in some manner. It was a nice problem and one yet to be solved.

At the moment there were more pressing needs. On leaving Robshaw's office he directed his steps toward Molly's Bonanza Belt wagon-yard. A

man at the Black Prince's loading dump told him where it was. Tramping a dusty side street, he grinned faintly to himself. "Sure have put my cowboy days behind me. I used to kick like a steer at havin' to walk across the street!" It was the truth —and symbolic of even more far-reaching changes in him.

Molly's quarters at the Belt was an open lot between two run-down buildings at the edge of town, one housing an assayor's office, the other a saddler's shop. A high fence closed in the back of the yard, which at the front sported a wide gate, giving free access to stray dogs and straw-chewing idlers. A shed stood at one side, serving as stable and harness-room; a wispy old man with bleached blue eyes cared for the girl's extra horses and kept the gear in order. Chance vouchsafed the set-up a single, comprehensive appraisal as he rounded the street corner, and nodded absent approval. He was going to need just such a place himself.

Striking across the dust, he was halfway to the gate when a lithe figure in overalls and woolen shirt emerged, and he found himself face to face with Molly Mulroy.

Their surprise was mutual and complete. Chance might not have come near the place, certainly not on his present errand, had he guessed her presence; it was too late to turn back now. As for Molly her face lit up involuntarily at the sight of him, tall, wide-shouldered, and grave.

"Chance! How glad I am to see you," she exclaimed. "I thought Sheriff Hardwick meant to—take you in."

"So did he," Chance grinned. "I changed all that."

"There was talk—" she began, breaking off awkwardly.

"I know. They accused me of stealin' your horses...Molly, you tried to tell me I shot your wheeler, too," pursued Chance bluntly. "You thought you had good reason. It just happens it wasn't so...Well, there's no more sense in this idea of Hardwick's than there was in that."

SHE WAS NOT hurt by his plainness, nodding assent. "I know. We listen to too much talk, all of us. We don't use our eyes and our wits." She laughed then, wonderingly. "A week ago you and I were perfect strangers. Yet it's perfectly true that I know you too well to believe any such thing for a minute."

Her natural warmth was like wine in Chance's veins. The softness of her eyes, the clear tan of her cheeks and rounded throat struck him afresh. Her unaffected interest in him was manifest; and this, in the midst of his deep gratfication, was hardest of all to understand. But that she by no means wore her heart on her sleeve he had cause to know from the past.

"You're looking mighty fresh and cheerful, after your scare," he chuckled, hoping to divert her mind from the purpose of his visit.

"Of course I am! Except for the worry it was wonderful—exactly the sort of adventure every healthy girl craves, but is too sensible to seek." She sobered then, studying his lean features. "That *does* sound selfish. I know it was not all fun for you—far from it, I suspect."

"Well—" he parried.

"You fought," she insisted steadily. "God knows what you went through. It is you to whom I owe the return of my horses—perhaps even my life." She gazed into his face, utterly ignoring his perturbation. "These are the things I was too embarrassed—too cheap and little to say, when they most needed saying—when you were under suspicion of the crime you yourself balked and prevented. I knew it was all wrong. I'm a callous, light-minded fly-by-night, Chance! But I have not forgotten," she ended softly.

"Why, Hardwick does his best, accordin' to his lights," he returned, smoothly diverting the blame from the sheriff. "He—had reason to think he had a case....Reckon I've changed without his knowin' it." He sought to lead her toward lighter topics, and insisted on looking around the wagon yard. His complete approval of the arrangement pleased Molly.

"Daddy Cliff gets the credit," she

averred. "If only I knew the business as he did!" Regret shadowed her tone.

"Well—he had a bit more practice at it," he pointed out easily.

MOLLY introduced him to Hoke Nevers, her aging barnman, whom she treated as a trusted partner and equal, and who worshipped her blindly in consequence. Nevers was thin and slit-eyed, and Gilbert, conscious of being looked over shrewdly, thought he was to be relied on in a pinch. If Molly had never gotten over the loss of her father, she had found another in old Hoke, and was lavish in her gratitude. "Hoke really runs the business," she confided to Chance in the old man's hearing. "And I take orders. I love it."

"Shore yuh do—sometimes anyway!" croaked Hoke delightedly.

Chance nodded approval. "You listen to him," he advised; and Nevers went red with pleasure.

"By the way, your saddle is here," said the girl as they passed through the barn. "Both were brought in the day after the storm. Yours fared better than mine—mine snagged on the rocks by a stirrup iron and got torn badly. Yours is battered but the oil saved it; a good rub-down should bring it back."

"He cain't have it till I've looked it over ag'in," put in old Hoke unexpectedly, from a far stall. Chance looked around with a smile.

"Thanks, Hoke. I'll come after it."

"He'll put it in perfect condition for you, the old fraud," Molly whispered as they entered the office. "You're about to learn the value of a kind word, spoken in season. Or," she laughed, "should it be me?"

"You'll do as you are," Chance decided judicially.

"What are you two whisperin' about?" said a voice, in a tone which might have been taken for severity. They whirled. Nate MacAloney was standing in the outer door, eyeing them keenly from beneath shaggy brows.

"Why, Uncle Nate! I never heard you." Molly was flustered. "Were you waiting?"

"Nothing serious," responded MacAloney dryly. "I've a tongue in my head." He turned to scrutinize Gilbert squarely.

"Still at large, Gilbert?"

Chance only nodded, wondering what the man would make of his being there. MacAloney, he recalled vaguely, had once been an attorney; certainly he was sharp.

"Is there any reason why Chance should not be—at large, as you call it?" asked Molly quickly.

"Well, if what I've heard is true—"

"It is not," she declared promptly. The mining man only smiled, with another slow look for Chance. He appeared exploring his mind for means to frame something he had to say, but his faintly burred drawl was easy enough.

"You'll make no mistakes for a while, boy, if ye're wise." He turned to Molly with purpose in his manner. "Your shipments've slacked off for a week past. Have ye talked with Packer?"

The girl met his look gravely. "No, Uncle Nate. Should I?"

"I've heard Henry is dickerin' with a freighter who's knocked off the San Carlos railroad job—Swingle, his name is: a no-good flyer plungin' on his father's fortune. Trouble can come on this, Molly. Your present contract runs not too long....Best see Henry, girl, and have an underdin'. Tell him where he heads in and he'll respect you more. I've heard talk—but no matter. Make Henry Packer mind if for but two weeks. Your future's in it."

"I will, Uncle Nate," she smiled obediently.

LISTENING, Chance made a note of where the power lay in this camp. A strong man ultimately took command in every mining camp; it seemed the natural course. Wondering if the inevitable clash had come yet between MacAloney and Larry Robshaw, he broke his reflections off short when the mine superintendent lowered his voice, murmuring to the

girl. When a pause came, he spoke up.

"I'll be goin, Molly."

"All right, Chance." She gave him her kindly smile. But MacAloney wouldn't have it that way.

"I'll be along with ye, Gilbert, and have a word." He held up a detaining hand. After another low-voiced exchange with Molly, he turned to leave with the younger man. They fell into step, turning out the wide gate and heading towa d Main street.

MacAloney was the first to speak. "Gilbert." He pulled out a cigar, bit the end off, took it in strong teeth and paused to light it, puffing thoughtfully; then, cocking a shrewd eye at Chance; "Are you in earnest about this teamin' proposition?"

Chance managed to conceal his surprise, his tone cool and amused. "Never was more so. But you ain't interested."

Nate spat thoughtfully, with a preoccupied air. "Maybe I am." Chance allowed his brows to hoist slightly at this.

"Change your mind?"

MacAloney, squinting absently at something up the street, seemed not to have heard.

"While you two were up Arivaipa wash," he changed the subject abruptly, "Molly's stranded wagons were hitched in and hauled to Benson for dumping. From a word she let drop, she thinks Robshaw was responsible. It was me....I hired a teamster—half Mexican—Pancho Vilas. An', Gilbert, the down-stage pulled in last night with word that he was in trouble."

Chance was far from surprised that Molly's rig should again have met with difficulties. It was not alone the value of her horses that had lured the stock-thieves.

"Vilas pulled out of Benson yesterday mornin' light—a few pieces of mixed freight in the wagons. Ten miles out he was fired on from the brush. He had a rifle; but what could he do? Scared kid swamper with him —some nephew of his. They saw absolutely nothin'. Vilas shot into the brush an' drove on....An hour later, out of a clear sky, the same thing happened again. Well, Vilas was spooked. Knocked his steeple hat off, this time; tore it up some....You ken the rock-cut below Cascabel. A boulder came smashin' down there—an' busted a plank or two off the swing-wagon. That finished Vilas. He quit cold. He's in El Castra now."

MacAloney knocked the ash from his cigar, examining its end critically "I couldn't tell Molly—with her wagons tied up again," he confessed ruefully. "She's dead game; she'd meet this challenge. Meet and lick it—I know her." He frowned. "But should she be allowed?'

Chance broke in, with thin-lipped urgency: "You want a teamster for those wagons?"

"I do that."

"I know your man," Chance spoke quietly. "Injun Bronson." He named an old frontiersman, well-known capable and fearless, who had been in the country since pioneer days. "We'll send him off on the stage after dinner. Bronson will get the outfit through as long as Molly needs him."

MacAloney's face cleared. "Ye'll do that for us?" he exclaimed doubtingly. "But can you persuade Bronson, boy?"

CHANCE NODDED. "I was talkin' to Injun this morning. He'll do it for me."

Nate looked like a man with a weight suddenly taken off his shoulders. "Gilbert," he said abruptly. "do ye still want the Black Prince's teamin'?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Well, you can have it. Provided," pursued Nate cautiously, "we come to terms."

Chance had gone over all this thoroughly; knew what he had to offer. He named his terms before he had time to think what this surprising development portended. MacAloney's brow darkened.

"Ye're none too generous with your services, are ye!" he snapped. Chance grinned.

"Seller's market, I should judge. This time you've come to me, Nate. That's my proposition."

They argued it out in detail. At

length MacAloney pronounced himself in accord.

"Great," Chance exclaimed as they shook hands on the deal. "Much obliged, Nate. No papers to sign, I take it? Your word's as good as a contract."

"It always has been....Ye'll start the day the ore-freights quit. It ye're not quite ready—"

"I will be. This is a business propostion with me—not something in return for finding Injun Bronson a job."

"No, boy! Neither of us is doin' Bronson any favor. He'll have his headaches drivin' for Molly....These 'accidents' won't stop. Somebody wants her out of the freightin' game—intends to force her out of it!"

"I want her out of it, too," said Chance grimly.

"And so do I!" MacAloney unexpectedly chuckled. "But there's the little matter of difference in method, my boy."

Their eyes met. They understood each other; and with that look a friendship sprang into being between the two strangely desperate men that was to endure.

CHAPTER XVII

Coppered

CHANCE WENT immediately in search of Injun Bronson, whom he located in the Mescalero. Although he had spoken without authority in assuring MacAloney that the frontiersman would work for Molly, he had no doubt of the outcome. Bronson, a grizzled, lanky veteran with pale blue eyes, loved a tough proposition. A good fight was his notion of living. After listening to Gilbert's heightened account of the girl's troubles, Injun consented to the arrangement without batting an eye.

"Shore, Gilbert. I'll take the little lady's outfit through," he rumbled. "Reckon I've admired her ever since she stepped into old Cliff's boots.... Any hard-boiled hombre honin' fer trouble'll have one hell of a time scarin' me off the job!"

The old rawhide's blustering only amused Chance. He knew Bronson to be as good as his brag, or a little better, and instructed him to leave for El Castra by stage that afternoon.

"I'll be driftin' up the valley, maybe tomorrow," Chance added. "But keep that to yourself. You'll pull into the Belt tomorrow night. Next day you'll hit the trail loaded. I'll meet you somewhere. Together we'll iron this thing out." That, it appeared, would be all right with Bronson. "And don't charge that girl any of your damned shotgun guard prices either," warned Chance severely, in conclusion. "Take what she offers and I'll make up the rest."

Injun's eyes widened in mock surprise. "So it's like that, eh?" he murmured vaguely.

"Yes—that's the way it is," exclaimed Gilbert fiercely. "And not a crack out of you about it, savvy?" But his eyes twinkled.

Bronson ambled away grinning in search of a bite to eat, before the stage pulled out, and Gilbert headed without delay toward the main offices of the Old Bonanza. It was crowding noon hour, but he caught Henry Packer in.

"I've come to write out that teamin' contract," he informed the other briefly.

"All right, Gilbert. Meet me here at one o'clock and we'll get right to work."

"No." Chance shook his head. "We'll start now."

"But dammit, man! I'm just getting ready to go out for my dinner," fumed Packer, crimson of face.

"Never mind that, Henry," retorted Chance brusquely. "I'm in a hurry. You'll go wthout food any day to save a dollar. That's what you intend to do in this agreement with me, isn't it?" he continued innocently.

Packer muttered crossly something about fools and their haste, but in the end he took off his coat. They set to work, hammering out a working arrangement. Although creating an impression of vigilance by his continued protests, Chance made no

attempt to drive a hard bargain. The time would come when pressure could be applied to Henry Packer with far greater effect. He seemed asking for it. The contract was ready for copying by the time the clerks returned from dinner, and Chance obdurately waited. After the surprising events of the morning, he had the Black Prince and the Copper King sewed up; and now he insisted on completing the business by getting his and Packer's signature on paper without the further loss of a minute.

"It's all settled," Henry expostulated, rendered irate by all this show of impatience. "You won't be turnin' a wheel for me for a good three weeks! What difference whether the papers are signed now or tomorrow?"

"Is there a difference?" Chance queried as if fearful he had overlooked something.

"Hell, no!"

"All right, then. I want the deal closed now, Henry, if it's all the same to you."

PACKER bit his frayed cigar stub savagely and flung himself into his chair. He was earning the dollars he had squeezed out of Chance, and it was comical to watch the struggle in him between avarice and a strong desire to throw this man out of hs office. At last the contract was ready Packer stabbed at it with the nib of his pen, almost tearing the paper; Chance signed with a flourish.

"Much obliged, Henry," he murmured, slipping his copy of the agreement into a pocket as he rose to leave. "I won't forget your—kindness in accommodatin' me." The last sound he heard as he stepped out the door was Packer's snort of wrath and exasperation.

Reaching the street, Chance paused. A haze had closed in across the sky dulling its fine brilliance. The breeze had swung round into the east, and the air bore a thin taint, acrid and persistent, which he did not like. For a moment Chance thought someone had built a bonfire on the edge of town; then the explanation struck him like a slap.

"That's coal-smoke from the work trains, blowin' down the canon," he muttered, wrinkling his nose distastefully. "It'll only be a matter of days now."

Like many a range man, Gilbert vaguely resented the intrusion of steel, but his momentary displeasure at the thought had no power to dull the edge of his exuberant spirits. He was in top form today, and he had reason to be. At last he was in a position to put to Molly the question crowding at the back of his tongue almost from the moment of his first sight of her. But for his hour with her this morning he told himself he would scarcely have dared the attempt even now. The memory filled him with a glow of warmth and well-being. From the beginning he had coolly refused to countenance the possibility of failure. Now he felt reasonably hopeful of success.

So rapid had been the course of events that he had found little time to ponder their cause. Nate MacAloney's refusal to deal with him had appeared an insurmountable obstacle. Chance perceived that circumstance had accomplished what he could not. "Nate sees the hell pilin' up, and he's afraid for Molly," he mused. "He knows what she hasn't guessed—that it can't go on. Go'n it alone, sooner or later she'd crack. She needs a man. Nate just won't let her batter her heart out on these ice-blooded wolves; and I reckon I won't either."

Swinging down Main, his attention was caught by a familiar figure several hundred yards ahead. Back to him, moving in the same direction, the man was not exactly attracting attention to himself; but Chance had no trouble in recognizing Sam Bodine. MacAloney's tale of recent developments had made him more than anxious for a talk with the drifter, and with this object in mind he increased his pace. A minute or two served to shorten the distance between them materially; when whatever instinct it is which apprises a man of the attention of others caused Bodine to throw a glance over his shoulder. He saw Chance. Instead of turning to wait, he only increased

his speed. It served to convince Gilbert of what he had long suspected: that instead of welcoming a meeting, old Bodine sought sedulously to avoid him. But this time Chance did not intend to let him escape.

"Sam!" he called out harshly. Bodine heard. He afforded Chance a flash of his white face, with burning eyes; then, scurrying to the near corner, he whipped around it and was gcne. It all happened in a moment, taking Chance by surprise, deep as he was in his own thoughts. He was on the point of springing in pursuit when a deep voice bellowed, "Hi, Chance, ol' catamount!" and a burly hand grasped his arm and whirled him around.

CHANCE'S knotted fists relaxed and the flush died out of his lean cheeks as he recognized Bob Krumbine, a mule rancher from the Pinal country. He had discussed with Krumbine a week before the purchase of some draft animals, and the deal was still in the air. Impatience riding him, Chance strove to break away from the man; but Bob argued amiably until all hope of overtaking Bodine seemed gone. They wound up in a bar, ten minutes later, with Gilbert promising to let the man know within a day or two just what he really needed. Chance treated then, taking a cigar for himself, and left.

He was on his way to the Mulroy Freighting Company's wagon-yard when the San Pedro stage rolled past. True to his word, Injun Bronson was aboard, sharing the box with the driver. He answered Gilbert's wave. Through the coach window a second later Chance got an unexpected glimpse of a lined, sharp-eyed face which showed itself for an instant and then withdrew. It was Sammy Bodine.

"Well, damn me!" Chance murmured, starng after him. "Ain't takin' no chances on runnin' into me again, is he?" He smiled to himself grimly. With Injun Bronson on that stage there was little danger of losing track of old Bodine for at least another day.

Five minutes later Gilbert walked into Molly's wagon-yard. Hoke Nevers looked out of the shed door sourly, but showed a snaggle-toothed grin on recognizing his visitor. He said: "Howdy, boy," in his cracked voice, and ambled forward.

"Molly around?" queried Chance.

"Unh-uh," was the negative answer. "Reckon she went down to the hotel—if yuh gotta see her," pursued Nevers, suddenly concerned.

"Thanks. I can walk down there." After a moment's gossip, Chance left and headed for the San Carlos with slowing step. While he had no doubt Molly was there, he felt a natural reluctance to seek her in her room. Reaching the place, he hesitated briefly at the door and then sat down on the porch to wait. Ten minutes passed, while his restlessness mounted. He was not getting anywhere this way. At length he got up to stroll down the long porch and glance in through the dining-room window. What he saw fetched a grunt of dismay out of him. At a corner table, laughing and talking as though enjoying themselves thoroughly, completely oblivious to their surroundings, sat Molly and Larry Robshaw eating their dinner.

Chance's lips thinned as he studied the man, and his thoughts turned suddenly bitter. "He don't lose a minute," he reflected bleakly. "Tryin' his level best to discourage and ruin her, rush her off her feet and drive her into his own arms, the oily skunk!"

HE READ TO the full the danger in Robshaw's smooth attentions. The man was of the sort that appealed strongly to women; and manifestly he had cultivated the faculty assiduously. He had no scruples whatever about taking advantage of every opportunity. Already Molly was firm in the belief that she stood deeply obligated to him. Acts of staunch friendship for which Nate MacAloney alone was responsible, Robshaw had coolly appropriated in her eyes. "Somebody's got to tell her," mused Chance soberly. "But I can't —and it ain't Nate's place."

He groaned at thought of what could happen while they struggled

with qualms of their own concerning what was right and just. Robshaw, too, was playing against time. It would be his way to dazzle a girl with romantic notions of elopement. That he was sincere in his driving passion to possess Molly, Gilbert grudgingly conceded; but the man was not good enough for her. The tragedy of such an alliance lay not in the present, but in the endless future years of disillusionment and heartbreak. Could Molly be trusted to perceive this danger and draw back before it was too late? Chance didn't know; and the uncertainty laid on him the curt necessity to act decisively and at once.

Moving back to his chair without awareness of what he did, he slumped into it. He was still there when a silvery laugh which he recognized with a pang, issuing from the doorway, aroused him from his abstraction. A man spoke lowly and confidently, and footsteps sounded; Chance averted his head as Robshaw emerged, to descend the steps and stroll off. As he stared after him broodingly, unmoving, a rallying voice suddenly made him start.

"Lost your wife—or is it indigestion?" She came forward, smiling. Chance was on his feet in an instant.

"I was waitin' for you," he told her soberly. "I'm goin' to give you a jar, Molly; but you'll likely weather it."

She stilled, caught by his unwonted resolution.

"What is it, Chance?"

He said doggedly: "You're goin' to marry me. Reckon I can say it now."

Her stare slowly gave way to a teasing expression of amusement. "Really?....Such masterful sentiment is breath-taking my friend—"

"No, I mean it," he insisted, devouring her with his eyes. Never had her self-possessed sweetness tormented him as now. "I ain't much; but you'll get used to me. We'll get it over with right off," he rushed on.

Once more her smile faded. She studied him with curious thoughtfulness. "No," she contradicted under her breath. "We won't."

BLOOD DYED his hard features to dusky bronze at this calm rejection, with so much finality in it. Weakness attacked his legs and his chest appeared about to burst. Venting an inarticulate exclamation, he reached toward her with rough hands; found her suddenly in his arms, crushed hard against his chest. He had forgotten utterly where they were; his kiss was like a blow, hard and clinging and generously for that one moment. Clearly he was the opposite of repugnant to her. She waited till he released her, and still she stood with soft, unwavering gaze.

"Do you love me, Molly?" he burst out hoarsely, with heaving chest.

"I—think I do. You're a dear, Chance," she murmured. "But the answer is still no."

He failed to understand—dared not comprehend, a mighty compulsion from within appearing to drive him on. "Nonsense! You've got to marry me!

...It ain't simply that I want you so bad—though Lord knows I do. But you're a part of me, you've taken possession of my life! Don't somethin' inside of you tell you that?"

She made no effort to speak, perhaps could not, but her lips formed an unmistakable negatve; while her softened eyes bespoke pity and sorrow for the anguish she was forced to inflict. Chance gazed at her almost sullenly, his face grown cold with the dourness of this thoughts.

"Then I'll have to carry you off," he declared abruptly.

She backed away a step at this, and ice touched her tone. "Don't make that mistake, Chance, if you ever want my favor."

"Then who is it?" he demanded desperately. "There must be somebody else!...Don't take the wrong man, Molly!" he pleaded earnestly. "I want you for what I can do for you—others for what you can do for them. Don't throw yourself away on a flashy gent who'll do you harm!"

MOLLY WAS hearkening now with a faintly mocking smile which did not get past her lips. Disdain tilted her chin and made her re-

mote and beautiful. But though she shook her head decisively, her voice had grown gentler.

"For your sake I am willing to believe you mean what you say," she told him. "But you're mistaken, Chance—thoroughly and completely. You are not thinking of me. You've no knowledge of my wishes, nor desire to ask them. You are very much of a man, I think." She broke off, to begin once more n a lower tone. "I'm sorry, Chance—honestly. Believe me, you can never conquer me with your will."

Chance's groan was hopeless. "It ain't my will! It's your whole life that's at stake! You've got to see that!"

"Perhaps I do see it—more clearly than you believe possible," she returned steadily. "I know what you have been doing for two weeks past. You've made up your mind about me; planned my life as *you* wish it, without so much as consulting me....You deceive yourself if you think that because I'm a girl I am blind!"

The red high in Chance's cheeks stole downward. "Wha—what?" He stumbled over his words. "What've I been doin' to you?"

"Must I tell you?...You've managed to throw me out of a job by cornering all of the teaming work in the camp—thinking to force me to accept a man, any man—you!" She shook her head sadly. "Anyone who takes any interest in me knows I've had a fight on my hands. I do not accuse you of all or even most of it—or of anything but a mistaken ambition, Chance. Perhaps that was your man's privilege. For the rest, jealousy has played a part; small-souled men determined to make a girl regret attempting a man's work. Did you think you would succeed where they failed?"

She paused, and when she spoke again it was like an afterthought, pensive, almost absent. "Perhaps all of you were right. At least it's over now.....You have made it impossible for me to find any teaming here."

"That's not true!" he exclaimed harshly. "I cornered the camp's teamin', yes. Did it for you! I swear I had no other object!"

"You must do it yourself now," she assured him swiftly. "You couldn't dream how much damage you did, Chance. Larry Robshaw and I were going partners—we planned to establish a big firm. The day of the lone wolf desert freighter, the army teamster on his own, is done, Larry says; in this country it went out with Dad. He is right, of course. But no matter. You chose a battle of wits and you've won. You know I'm grateful for all that you did for me. I refuse to do you as well as myself an injury, as a sorry reward, by giving in to your proposals now."

"That's all b u n k!" ejaculated Chance violently. "I'm no fast talker, Molly. I wanted to earn a fortune for you—independence—peace and happiness; I believe in my strength to do it. And so—" he added with a flash of shrewdness—"do you? But you've been listenin' to someone. It's your right to seek advice, and maybe I've held mine back too long. Or maybe you just don't want it....But don't m a k e a terrible mistake! There's more sand in Gust Henrik's little finger than in Robshaw's whole carcass. Henriks may be nothin' but a freighter; but don't fool yourself his kind is done yet! At least his cards are all on the table. And he's a fighter!"

She absorbed this silently, arrested. Surprise spoke in her hushed tone. "Why, Chance! I believe you're handing me over to Gust now—"

"I'd send you to the devil," he burst out hotly, "before I saw Larry Robshaw get you!...Oh, I know. You think I'm buckin' him because I hate him. Well, I hate what he stands for, all right." Abruptly his tone moderated. "Molly, if I entertained the slightest suspicion that he had your happiness at heart, we'd certainly never've had this row."

Her hand hovered forward and came to rest lightly on his own. "No one would ever accuse you of lacking in good intentions, Chance," she

murmured impulsively. "I least of all."

He knew suddenly that he couldn't take it any longer. Eyes dimmed with misery, his chest aching, Chance mumbled his apologies and wheeled away. Somehow he found the steps, stumbled down them and moved off.

CHAPTER XVIII

Loser's Game

WALKING away from the hotel, striving mightily to appear as if nothing had happened, Gilbert felt like a man who has just received a stunning blow on the head. He was sick and dazed. So much for his infallible guiding star! He had gambled everything on a long chance and lost.

Wandering down Main, drugged with pain, he was barely aware of what he did. No longer did there remain any pressing chore to be attacked with zest. The chain of his days was broken, snapped off short; it no longer mattered, with the one vital interest washed away, whether he did a thing. Nor did he feel any slightest desire to do anything. Habit pure and simple directed his aimless steps into the Mescalero, where he showed a face of ice to the bartender, and without speaking twiddled an imperious finger toward the bottles on the back-bar.

The first drink, down at a gulp, was like fire in his throat but otherwise without any effect whatever; nor did the second produce any different result. For half an hour Chance stood like stone, downing a fresh drink at intervals in the vain effort to defeat and rout the numbness creeping over him. But if he spoke to no one, looked nowhere save directly before him at the dully polished bar, he was not oblivious of the men who moved about him, nor did the pair who presently stepped to the bar beside him escape recognition.

They had ridden in Dan Hardwick's posse on that fool's errand up Arvaipa Wash—Robshaw's men, who had sought ruthlessly to crowd Gilbert to the wall and force him to fight,. Recognizing their voices, he gave no sign of that awareness. The two might have had their drink and walked out unmolested had not the nearer, tossing a glance at Chance, looked again more closely and then stealthily nudged his companion. The other man turned, stared at Chance boldly, and vented a harsh laugh.

"Well, well! King of the hawss-thieves!" he jeered. Gilbert might have been stone deaf for all the response this gibe evoked. Pouring another drink with steady hand, he downed it at a gulp, aloof and indifferent.

"Braver'n a lion—that's him!" went on the smooth, insulting voice. For several minutes it continued in a droning sneer, adding refinements of scathing ridicule as they occurred to mind, with taunting delays between each outburst—still with no result.

SUCH MANIFEST lack of spirit was highly provocative. Savoring their enjoyment of the situation, the pair fell to tossing the ball back and forth, each outdoing the other in stinging rapier wit. Gilbert's adamant silence rendered the game tiresome after a time. They pretended to weary of it and forget him, speaking of other things; the one nearer Chance turning his back squarely on him. A moment later his elbow, cocked sidewise on the bar, jogged Chance's glass. The elbow withdrew then as if conscious of encroachment; but next moment it was back with a careless sweep that spilled the glass and sent it rolling. The elbow's owner crowded into Chance roughly forcing him back.

With sudden, tearing ferocity Chance exploded into action. Turning lithely on the ball of his foot, he whipped an arm around the man's neck and yanked him backward in a brutal cross-hip. The fellow bellowed his amazement and wrath, writhing ineffectually. Over his shoulder Chance saw his partner's hand streak for his gun. Altering his tactics in a flash, Gilbert flung the tough for

ward, and, slamming into his mate violently, the man's bulk blocked the other's draw. Chance did not stop at this, however. With arms extended, both hands planted on the red-checked lumberjack shirt, he shoved —hard. There was a moment of doubt as to the outcome; then down the pair went, striking the floor with a sliding crash, in a tangle of arms and legs: one of the close-cropped bullet-heads, hat gone, colliding with the boards with a mighty thud.

Almost before they landed, Chance was crowding forward over them. He did not propose to let this situation get out of hand; moreover, he bore these men a grudge which, once laid firm hold of, turned fiercely sweet in his mouth. With an inexorable sweep of long arms, he plucked the uppermost ruffian into the air, stood him on his uncertain feet, and whirled the man sharply. The latter was too dazed to do more than stagger forward blindly, arms groping. Chance slugged him over the belt-buckle; and as he jackknifed, straightened him with a clip on the jaw that could be heard in the street. Clutching wildly, the man succeeded in tying Chance up for an instant. He hung on and they staggered about, breath whistling. Then Gilbert hurled him off. After that it was bitter, relentless, one-sided punishment. Not again did the fellow get clawing hands on Chance, though he tried desperately. Chance drove him from bar to wall rocking him with an avalanche of blows, while the spectators yelled cheers and advice, or skipped nimbly out of the way.

"Whut in hell yuh doin', Chance?" bawled a puncher from the top of the bar. "Lay off before yuh kill 'im!"

The time came when even Chance was forced to admit there was no more effective opposition remaining in the sorry-looking ex-posseman. Summoning all the soul-deep disgust he felt, he flung the tough violently toward the door, planting a teeth-jarring kick on his rear. The fellow took half a dozen running steps, progressively losing the battle to regain his balance, and spread-eagled with a slap that raised the dust.

With a whining outburst of mingled fear and anguish, he scrambled to the door on hands and knees and tumbled through, to disappear in a twinkling.

GILBERT whirled toward the second rough, who lay sprawled and sodden where he had fallen, knocked cold when he hit the floor. Chance started for him. The dead hush was profound while awed men waited to see what he meant to do. Methodically, thin lips compressed, Chance twined a hand in the man's shirt-collar and started dragging him out. There was a draw-out sound of heels scraping the cracks of the boards, then a thud as Chance dumped the man on the porch and wiped hands on levi-clad thighs; then he turned back inside.

An excited onlooker in black coat and bowler hat advanced with laughing comment. One look at Gilbert's lean hatchet face, with white spots high over the cheekbones, the taut mouth and blazing eyes; and the words died on the man's lips. Reaching the bar, Chance righted his glass and poured a stiff slug. The motion which raised the glass toward his mouth, absolutely steady, and pausing halfway, turned abruptly into a vicious flirt which crashed it to the floor and sent its contents spattering in every direction.

Starting away from the bar, he strode out of the Mescalero.

"Reckon I ain't any part of a man," he brooded somberly, moving up the street. "Forgettin' all them fine words I was breakin' my neck to impress her with—and takin' the first out handy when I lose!"

The truth was, he was still dazed by the treacherous blow fate had dealt him. He had dared to dream of a fine plucky girl, appropriating her life, her future, with never a thought of her consent. He admitted his mistake now, face aflame with incredulous chagrin and burning shame. He had thought to outlive his past, sloughing it like an old skin—and had been tripped in the one last great gamble of his life.

"One thing she can be proud of—

and that's ruinin' a first-rate gambler," he soliloquized grimly. "I'll never play out another hand as long as I live without turnin' up my hole card."

Meanwhile, he scorned to accept so easy a way out as circumstance suggested. Something sterner than his blasted hopes, the disinterested manhood Molly had believed him to represent, bespoke his plain duty. Far from finding it an onerous task, Chance discovered a measure of relief in its contemplation. The method of accomplishment was another matter. Racking his brains for some means of achieving his object, Chance trudged heavily up the path toward the hospital on the hill.

There was a detached, medicinal air about the place which had always daunted him, a healthy man; and this alone rendered him uneasy. He stood awkwardly while the head nurse eyed him penetratingly, having detected the odor of whisky about him. But this, in a mining-camp, was no uncommon thing. Satisfied, she said yes, he might see Gust Henriks for a few minutes. The swamper, out of danger now if no complications ensued, was mending rapidly. Threading the iodoform-haunted halls, Chance entered a spotless room at her heels.

HENRIKS LAY pale but otherwise unchanged, dwarfing the bed; his burly bulk and black hairiness seemed a profanation there. "Howdy, Gilbert," he nodded with small enthusiasm, his eyes keen but heavy. Chance sat down on the edge of a chair and wrestled with his hat-brim till the nurse took her leave. Then he leaned forward, purpose pouring into his lean face.

"Henriks, how soon will you be on your feet?"

Gust regarded him obdurately.

"Week or so. Why?"

"Good. The steel will be pushin' in here in ten days. Ore'll be ridin' the cars in two weeks at the outside. You ought to be under your own power before that." Chance pulled some crumpled papers out of his pocket. "Look. I've got here the contracts for all the camp's teamin'—"

Henriks snorted gustily, "Damn you, if you've come here to wave that under my nose!"

"Keep your shirt on, man. I corraled these agreements for Molly and no one else," interjected Chance sharply. "Here's Robshaw's agreement, a mighty juicy deal...Henry Packer made me sign on poor terms. But he's hooked an' the squeeze can be put on him. MacAloney closed with me by word of mouth; Nate'll stick to his bargain though. The little mines'll fall in line like buzzards off a fence."

"All set, ain't yuh!" growled Henriks sourly. Chance struggled to keep his temper.

"You mean Molly is. I told you, Henriks, these contracts are for her."

"Then give 'em to her."

Gust's tone was curt, disbelieving. Still convinced that Gilbert had come there to flout and bedevil him, he was searching for the hidden object behind it all; and Chance's reluctant headshake came as no surprise.

"That's the rub," confessed Chance ruefully, for the first time displaying uncertainty. "I got off on the wrong foot with her—made a sweet mess of it. I can't give her a thing. I know it. But *you* can make her believe you came by these contract agreements fair."

"Yuh mean you'd sign over them papers to me?" interrupted Henriks incredulously, his voice filled with suppressed excitement.

"Sure. You see—"

"Wait a minute!" Mystification tensed the rocky lines of the Dane's face. "*Why?* That's what I don't savvy, Gilbert....Yuh been drinkin' heavy; but I'll swear yuh ain't drunk. What do yuh stand to gain by this big-hearted generosity of yores?"

He still clung to his suspicion. Gust never would be clever; he was only faithful. Chance gave over abruptly any lingering thought of deception. Either he must tell this man the truth, force him to recognize and acknowledge it, or forever earn his hatred and distrust.

"Well, Henriks—it's Robshaw. He's

tryin' to grab Molly—or worse—make her crawl to him, beggin'! Haven't you seen that?...Will you believe that he offered me his teamin', shoved it at me, on the understandin' that I was to corral all the camp's work? Have you guessed what else he's been up to, tryin' to smash her little business—kick it out from under her?"

He knew from Gust's reaction that all this was news of the first order. Henriks listened now in stupefaction; scepticism would come later. Gilbert knew he must clinch his facts, prove them incontrovertible, or Henriks would never be brought to full belief in the end. He marshaled his evidence item by item, revealing nothing that would render Robshaw liable to criminal action, it was true, but building up a damning indictment which made the veins in Henriks' temples stand out and corded his jaws.

"By Gawd, Gilbert, yuh got him pegged fer a fact! Why didn't I never see that?" he exclaimed, deep emotion turning his voice harsh. Chance nodded grimly, hiding his exultation. He had the man coming his way.

"That's what we're up against, Henriks," he declared flatly. "I'm washed up with Molly, myself; but damned if I don't keep that wolf from gettin' her at any cost! Besides," he added pointedly, "where would your job be if he succeeded in smashin' her business?"

Henriks went saddle-colored as this new aspect of the situation sank in and his sense of the wrong done him was instantly inflammed. "Damn his yellow hide! he gritted. "He'll never git away with this!"

"Don't fool yourself! He's close to gettin' away with it right now; and he will, unless we stop him.... Does that mean you'll take over these teamin' agreements and get Molly to handle 'em?"

GUST STARTED to speak, then hesitated. "What are yuh askin' for 'em, Gilbert?" he queried huskily. Plainly this was the crux of the matter in his mind, and he was afraid Chance would name a sum it would be impossible to lay hands on.

Chance replied levelly: "Only your word that you'll let me square accounts with Robshaw when the time comes."

Henriks was thunderstruck, striving to take it in. But he did not propose to allow this golden opportunity to slip away. "Get a paper and pen," he directed harshly. "We'll get this over with right away, an' I'll settle it with Molly first time I see her."

Chance arose to ask the nurse for the desired articles, and was soon back. Between them they worded a simple agreement recording the transfer of the teaming contracts. At Chance's suggestion they were assigned directly to the Mulroy Freighting Company.

"I'll leave it to you to explain to Molly how you got hold of these contracts," said the latter, as Henriks folded his copy of the agreement and tucked it under his pillow along with the other papers. "She knows I had them. Whatever you do, don't say I just handed 'em over!"

Henriks assented. "What makes yuh so shore yuh no longer stand a chance with her, Gilbert?" he queried with forced casualness.

"I asked her this mornin' to marry me," admitted Chance shortly, with averted eyes. "The answer was no." He fell into bleak reflection into bleak reflection, gazing past the window. "Molly likes her own way—I found that out. It's her privilege. But you seem to get along with her, Henriks. If it looks like Robshaw will persuade her to marry him, you'll have to block him some way without lettin' her know it."

Unexpectedly Henriks began to laugh. "I can take care of that all right," he promised with assurance. "I happen to know that neither you nor Robshaw will get her."

Chance stared at him. "How do you know that?" he demanded.

"Women are deep, Gilbert." There was a fathomless satisfaction in Henriks' eyes now. "She may not have told you, but Molly has promised to marry me the day I get on my feet.

You can bet I'll be on 'em before she changes her mind!"

CHAPTER XIX

Avalanche

ROCKED TO his heels by the totally unexpected news he had heard from Gust Henriks' lips, Gilbert got out of the hospital somehow. Every instinct cried out against his acceptance of the incredible fact. Of the girl's real relations with her swamper he knew absolutely nothing. Had Henriks suddenly recalled that—and with unparalleled guile, lied to eliminate completely one of his rivals? Gilbert was himself grabbing at straws now, and he knew it. At some time during the course of this disastrous day his star had entered a strange new phase. Still too much the gambler to ignore portents of such convincing weight, he did not know what to think, and the uncertainty rendered him wretched.

Bob Krumbine and another man who Chance had approached concerning a number of flat-bed wagons were sitting on the hotel porch when he arrived there. They hailed him and began immediately to talk business. Finding himself without sufficient spirit to fend them off, he acceded indifferently to their demands for an immediate deal; and to settle the matter, with almost the last of his money he closed the purchase of a number of mules and wagons for which he no longer had any conceivable use.

"Hold on," Krumbine called as Chance turned in at the door, glad to escape. "Where'll we deliver, Gilbert?"

"At Mulroy's wagon-yard," returned Chance offhandedly. What Hoke Nevers would do with the new equipment he did not know; but probably Molly could make use of it. If the idea of acquiring it thus did not appeal to her, she would have considerable difficulty locating anyone with whom to lodge a protest.

Making sure he had left nothing in his room, Chance paid his bill at the desk and trudged toward the livery barn. He should have gone for his saddle before pulling out of Bonanza Belt, but refused to face the possibility of meeting Molly again. He had a battered hull borrowed from Mitch Morrel that would do.

"Six Bits—and one in your mouth," he mused soberly as he saddled the trim grulla. "That's about what I hit this country with; and it's about what I'll have in my pocket when I leave."

"What am I gonna do with yuh?" demanded Mitch in mock despair, gazing at his friend with eyes which could not hide the concern he felt. "Yuh won't drink, yuh won't try a hand at poker—yuh won't do anything! For yore sake I reckon I can stand yore bein' in the money; but the wear an' tear is awful. All yuh do is prowl arbund lookin' for Sam Bodine. Way yo're huntin' the old wreck yuh'd think he was Redfield himself, an' you the sheriff."

PAUSING in his restless striding up and down the gangway of Rawles' livery barn, in El Castra, Chance favored the cowboy with a prolonged regard. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. A deep and far-reaching change had occurred in him during the last few days which Mitch did not like; he was stern, remote, haunted by something; some idea had certainly root in his mind now.

"How'd you come to think of that?" he grunted.

"What makes me think of anythin'?" Mitch was indignant. "Danged if my mind ain't threatenin' to crack, the way yo're actin'. What's eatin' yuh now?"

Gilbert rasped his jaw reflectively. "Maybe nothing. But I've got a notion—"

"Honest!....What is it, huh?"

Chance shook his head. "I ain't sayin'. But if my hunch is right, once I catch up with him Sam Bodine'll wish he'd never been born!" He ruminated deeply. "Only one flaw in this whole set-up—I wish I

knew what has become of Bully Bromley!"

"I was in Benson a week ago. Seen Brom on the street," offered Mitch helpfully. "Later he headed down the valley....What yuh want of him?"

Chance looked up quickly. "That's interestin'. Brom ain't in El Castra, that's sure. Reckon he never got this far. Must be hangin' around Cash Conklin's deadfall at Cascabel." This information, pieced out as it was, settled once and for all the identity of Pancho Vilas' attacker. The place he mentioned, a bar and grocery some miles out on the south trail, was a known outlaws' hangout: ideal headquarters for Bromley's nefarious business.

It was afternoon of the day after Chance had taken his leave of Bonanza Belt for good. He had thought himself done with the affairs of Larry Robshaw. Only his promise to Injun Bronson had kept him from riding over the hills. But that morning he had spotted a dark, sallow-faced man watching him from across the street. He had to glance twice before he recognized a clerk in Robshaw's office. It sent a shock through him. Robshaw was having him watched. Once and for all it fixed in Chance's unsettled mind the knowledge that he was not done with the business. All his old suspicions awoke. But now they were stronger than ever, a hitherto unknown fierceness filling his veins.

He knew Sam Bodine to be somewhere in El Castra. For months the little man had used a hall bedroom at the Rimrock House. A thorough search, however, had turned up no sign of the desert derelict. But failure only whetted Gilbert's imperious need. All day he kept the saloons and mescal joints under close surveillance; Mitch Morrel, for all his chaff, had helped. He was still waiting. It was a game that got on Mitch's nerves finally, worried as he was about Chance.

"I'm goin' down for a drink," he spoke up suddenly. "Comin'?"

CHANCE'S hand-wave was answer in full. The Gourd cowboy moved off, making for the Red Eagle; ten minutes later he had not returned. Chance strode to the big double-door of the barn to peer out. The slanting late afternoon sunshine, moted and yellow, was hard on the eyes. El Castra's street lay peaceful and almost empty. At a sound of horse-hoofs in the muffling dust he bent his glance that way, and abruptly stood as if turned to stone.

Along the edge of the street in a compact mass, walking their horses with leisurely indolence, five men came riding. They may have been coming from Cascabel. Bromley was at their head, a swarthy, dark, imposing figure; at his flank rode Dave Cullers, thin, slouching, with something deadly about his lean hawk-like face. Of the remaining three Gilbert recognized Robshaw's two henchmen, whom he had beaten and thrown out of the Mescalero in Bonanza Belt, and who still bore the marks of that experience; and by his look, the last of the five was as unsavory.

Riding past with an exchange of muttered words, these men might not have noticed Gilbert standing in the gangway of the barn. But Dave Cullers' sliding, insolent glance, flicking his face deliberately, proved their keen awareness. Hands on hips, skin tingling at the subtle insult, Chance watched them pass on like any range crew entering town. His roving glance picked out Dane Hardwick, standing in the door of his office, watching the newcomers narrowly.. Suddenly Chance's scalp crawled. They were heading toward the Red Eagle. Mitch Morrel was down there.

As they piled off their horses and moved inside, another man angled across the street in the direction of the saloon, his short stature and halting gait identifying him at once. It was Sam Bodine. He must have been waiting for that moment. The long white blur of his face turned that way, and he laughed.

Chance stood motionless, tensed and alert, as Bodine entered the bar behind the others; scenting a sinis-

her design in this whole brazen show of boldness. Not till he had studied it out to the end would he take action. He was still pondering when a man came tumbling out of the Red Eagle, arms and legs flying. A muffled shout or two rang out as he landed in the dirt. Chance uttered a tense exclamation. Even at that distance he recognized Mitch Morrel. The wrathy cowboy had not been hurt; he got up, slapping dust out of his pants, and backing away venting angry curses, finally to turn and hurry forward.

"They throwed me outa there!" he ejaculated, outraged.

Chance nodded briefly, gazing down that way with slitted eyes. "They're gettin' back at me. Reckon it's my turn now to take a hand."

"No sir! Don't yuh do it!" retorted Mitch instantly. "That's jest what they're waitin' for, Chance! That place is a bear-trap, I tell yuh! They'll make a sieve out of yuh the minute yuh step in the door!"

CHANCE absently hitched up his his belt, conscious of the weight sagging at his hip. "I've got to go down there, Mitch—"

"No!" yelled Morrel. "Don't yuh be a damn fool!" He flung himself before Chance, red of face. Gilbert thrust him roughly aside. "All right—go ahead then!" blurted Mitch. "Git yoreself killed! They got yuh figgered right at that!" The bitterness of it warned Chance, halting and turning him.

"You're right, Mitch. Why do them any favors?" he said slowly. "We'll wait this out."

Ed Rawles, the liveryman, came through the barn, attracted by high voices. He asked what was wrong, and Morrell told him briefly. Rawles looked scandalized. "There's a scatter-gun in the office," he grunted. "Shall we go down there an' clean house?"

Gilbert remained undecided, however. He knew the situation called for strategy but was unable to hit on a plan. Moving to the door to reconnoiter, a swift change from sunlight to shadow made him look up. The sun had dropped behind the western range; evening was at hand. Chance frowned as a hitch occurred in his sober thinking.

"Maybe it ain't me they're layin' for at all," he soliloquized.

"Huh?" said Mitch, caught. Chance did not reply. He had cocked an ear and was listening carefully—looking long and intently on past the Red Eagle, toward the Bonanza Belt trail. The next moment he broke into furious cursing.

"What in hell now?" cried Mitch.

"Plenty! ..... Molly Mulroy's freight-team is just pullin' in," Chance bit out.

Even as he spoke, the big, eight-hitch ore rig, with its high box wagons, rumbled into view. Dusk was descending rapidly, palpable veils of shadow rising like water out of the gray mesquite; but Gilbert stared as he made out the girl herself, astride a wheeler. Then he glimpsed Injun Bronson's head above one of the wagons.

Without a word Chance burst out of the gangway on the run, progressing with the peculiar wobble induced by high riding-heels but making good time, his feet slapping the dust. He won past the saloon, now ominously silent, and was making rapidly for Molly's pointers when Dane Hardwick's heavy voice rolled against him.

"Hyar!" the lawman bellowed, from his shack. *"What're you up to, Gilbert?"*

On the instant there rang out the shattering crash of a rifle shot, coming from the Red Eagle doorway. Gilbert's hat sailed away and he ducked. "Get down!" he yelled harshly to Molly. "Get out of the way!"

A second shot roared from the saloon, and a third. Chance waited only to see Molly tumble out of the saddle, white face blank with amazement, and disappear behind the lead wagon; then he whirled. His Colt flashed out and spat streaks of flame, licking toward the saloon front. Glass jingled sharply. A jeering cry from within was the only response.

"Poor shootin', Gilbert!" it taunted, in the thin acidulous voice of Dave Cullers. "Why don't yuh come and git us?"

Hardwick bawled a thunderous and wrathy protest, striding into the street. "Come out of that!" he roared, facing the empty door of the Red Eagle. A single dim light burned there, far toward the back. "Come out—or I'm comin' in!"

"Plenty of room where we are!" retorted Bromley's heavy bass tones.

HARDWICK, nearer the door than Chance, was in midstride when a six-gun cracked flatly inside the place. One of Dane's legs crumpled and he went down, a look of vast surprise on his leathery visage. Gilbert uttered a cry and sprang forward. He was ten feet from the door when a chair, hurled from within, came sailing out to splinter on the ground. Unable to stop himself, Chance fell over it just as a string of shots blasted from the interior of the bar. Landing violently, he leaped up; and a carelessly directed slug shearing the heel from his boot, nearly toppled him again.

"Hyar! Gilbert!" exploded Injun Bronson in stentorian accents, climbing down from the wagon, rifle in hand. "Don't try that!"

Chance knew that as matters stood, he would never get foot in the door alive. "Hell!" he flashed. Whirling, he set off on the run again, making for Rawles' barn. He collided in the doorway with Mitch. "Out of my way!" he blazed. The cowboy fell back stupefied. Slamming into the livery office, Chance emerged carrying the scatter-gun the livery-man had mentioned, and stuffing fresh shells into his six-gun. He found that Mitch was waiting for him.

"Come on!" he rasped. "We'll go up there an' finish it!"

Gilbert thrust him back. "Stay away, before you get killed!"

Mitch stared after him, and then grinned. It was Chance's show, and he recognized the fact. "I allus knew he was a cyclone," he flung at Rawles, standing with dropped jaw. "If he walks in on them hombres now, they'll think hell broke loose!" But he moved up, his gun ready, to cover the rear.

It was nearly dark now.

Chance strode toward the Red Eagle steadily, with a face of stone, looking neither to right nor left. A dozen yards from the place he halted as Bronson waved to him to wait. From a point of vantage the frontiersman methodically raked the saloon's front with deep-ranging rifle slugs. When his magazine clicked empty, Chance stepped boldly to the door. For an instant he stood at one side, his lean hard figure lithe and hawklike in readiness; compact of sheer hell, independence of soul, and malign purpose.

Then, shotgun leveled at his hip, he reached the dark opening and sprang inside.

CHAPTER XX

Charles The First

WALKING into a trap deliberately prepared for him, Gilbert did not make the mistake of standing still. Surprise at his sudden appearance made the outlaws hold their fire for a second; and in that space of time Chance leaped aside and crouched.

Outside, darkness had thickened. Even here the single dim lamp that burned in the rear of the place cast only a faint and shadowy illumination; in that first sweeping scrutiny Chance saw little or nothing. Near the door a pile of unused tables and chairs were stacked, the only immediate refuge at hand. As he slipped behind them five guns roared in concert, rocking the room, already hazy with powdersmoke. It was not the bulk of these flimsy objects, but the sense of obstruction they presented, which saved him from summary annihilation, for not a slug came anywhere near him during that first wild burst.

He knew better than trust to such precarious cover for longer than a few moments, however. Nor did he bother to reply to that first blazing greeting. His thoughts churning with split-second precision, he knew what he had to do. The thunder of those spiteful guns had not died away be-

fore he leaped again, this time gaining the corner of the bar.

Now he was in a more satisfactory position of defense—more than half of a pitched battle such as this promised to be. Still Chance did not go into action. Laying the scatter-gun down, he drew his Colt and waited till he heard swift stealthy foot-steps just outside the door. Raising the weapon above the level of the bar then, he sprayed the other end of the room with a hail of lead. The racketing shots served somewhat to cover the plunging entrance of Injun Bronson. From the tail of his eye Chance glimpsed a fleeting shadow, caught a scraping clatter, and guessed that Bronson was placing his hopes in the safety of a horizontal position, flat on the floor. A scatter of explosions and a harsh yell attested the renegades' awareness of what was going on. This bold invasion of their stronghold by the enemy in force was the last they had expected.

"*Gilbert!*" the old frontiersman whispered guardedly in the interval. "Did they git yuh?"

"I'm here," Chance muttered low. "Look out for yourself!"

This exchange promptly drew further shots; glass jangled and splinters rattled about. At a venture Chance fired the length of the bar at knee height, and behind it. A curse rewarded him. He tried again, angling his aim into the enclosed space under the bar. With a hoarse bellow a man lurched up, nearly upsetting the bar. and then sprawled in the corridor behind it.

"One down!" sang out Bronson, reading aright the inference of these sounds. "Smoke 'em, boys!" His own weapon crashed defiance.

Yells resounded in the shadowy depths of the place. The warmth of this fire was forcing the defenders to reconsider their positions. There was some hoarse bickering in angry whispers, and a thump or two. Chance strove to read their direction.

"Stay out from behind the bar," Bronson warned loudly. "These rifle slugs are a tough prop'sition. Nothin'll stop 'em!"

The sanguine news unnerved the roughs. With a sudden rush of feet they stampeded. Chance made out their dim outlines—they were charging for the rear door. Leaping up, he raced down the bar, hurdling the prone man, to head them off as yells and scuffling sounded. Rounding the end of the bar, he came face to face with the four, their eyes glittering wildly. It was a taut moment. The dull glint of raised weapoons warned Chance; he cut loose with the scatergun at point-blank range. There was a scream as its blast rocked the air. Two of the renegades were chopped down as though with an axe —a third flung up his arms, crashed across a table, and rolled off. That one was Bromley. The fourth wheeled to charge back up the room.

THROUGH gauzy layers of gunsmoke Chance watched his flight as if in a trance. Why didn't Injun shoot? He caught the escaping man's outline faintly silhouetted against the oblong of the open door, showing it to be Dave Culers. As Cullers reached the aperture, Bronson's rifle crashed once. The killer's stride faltered; he took one more running step and somersaulted wildly into the street, to sprawl there and relax in the dust. A moment of profound silence ensued.

Light flashed as Ed Rawles appeared at the door carrying a lantern, supporting Hardwick by one arm. "Okay, Sheriff," growled Bronson gruffly. "Reckon the shootin's over." Gilbert, however, did not delay. Leaning the shotgun against the displaced bar, he slipped through the door into the musty back hall. It was pitch dark there and he proceeded silently. He alone had noted the absence of Sam Bodine. But he caught no betraying sound of stealthy movement. A moment later, gun in hand, he crawled through a rear window.

The brush was silent. Reaching the edge of the street, Chance moved in shadow till he came opposite the Rimrock House. This he watched intently for several minutes, though it appeared deserted; everyone in town, apparently, had made for the Red Eagle at the cessation of shooting.

Stealing across, Chance moved down its dark side to the corner by the open steps running up the back, on the outside; there he waited. Presently a low groan and the sound of heavy breathing came to him. The brush parted and a dark figure emerged. In the starlight Gilbert made out Bodine, panting and badly shaken, no longer the lion of earlier years. When things began to grow hot he had cut and run.

A bench ran along the wall beside the steps, and on this the old man sank with a sigh. Chance slipped round the corner and eased onto the bench beside with scarcely a sound.

"Howdy, Sam," he said coolly.

Bodine jerked and stared, face white. "What yuh want with me?" he blustered weakly.

"Nothin' much. Just want to ask you a question or two about Larry Rob—".

"I don't know a thing!" blurted Sam, before he could finish. Chance smiled bleakly.

"Maybe I know enough to help you get started, Sam....How'll it be if I tell Hardwick I know where to lay hands on Redfield the Rustler—that he ain't dead at all?"

SMOOTH as they were, the words unnerved Bodine completely. "There ain't a word of truth in it!" he bleated hoarsely. "Whoever told yuh I was—" He stopped.

Gilbert's smile grew thin. There was a purr in his voice now. "Sam," he said softly, "how much is it worth to tell me what I want to know—if I agree to forget?" This hint of unexpected mercy made Bodine collapse nervously.

"I'll talk!" he panted. "I'll tell yuh anythin'!"

"Sure you will....Sam, was Robshaw behind these crazy raids on Molly Mulroy's freight outfit?"

"Shore! He aimed to bust the girl—make her borrow from him—or give up. He wanted her himself! He—"

"Then Robshaw planned the shootin' from ambush; the fights; the stealin' of her horses?"

"An' paid for it all, too," acknowledged Sam, with extreme agitation.

"What about Wetherby's killing?"

"Wal—" Bodine struggled with himself, but his fears won. "Sime overheard Robshaw tellin' us to make away with them hawses—at least he knew somethin', or suspected. In Conklin's bar at Cascabel, it was.... Robshaw ordered us to git rid of Wetherby. Dave Cullers done it."

Chance nodded. "He's paid for it. And this gun," he prompted, tapping the bone grip at his hip. "You overdid it a little with that yarn you spun about Redfield's curse—the Grim Lady. Tried to scare me into givin' it up, didn't you, Sam?....Whose was it?"

Bodine tried to meet his gaze, and failed. "Robshaw's," he gasped. "Cullers kicked 'bout doin' the job with his own gun, the way it was first planned. Larry give him that one—"

"Ah!" Gilbert's eyes glinted. This was even better than he had dared hope. "So our big-shot is wanted for murder too! That about clinches it."

After this confession of collusion and infamy, Bodine was rapidly going to pieces, shaking violently.

Yuh won't — tell Hardwick, Chance?" he pleaded pitifully.

"Why bother to tell 'im?" grunted a new voice. To Sam's consternation the sheriff hobbled around the corner, supporting himself on a stick. "He never hears nothin'....Thought I heard voices back here," he proceeded matter-of-factly. "What is it yuh know about Bodine, Gilbert, that he don't want me to know?"

"Who—me?" Chance shot a look at Sam. The onetime famous rustler was thoroughly crushed, that was plain; never again would he dare active participation in serious mischief. "Not a thing," he lied innocently. "He was tellin' me some things about Larry Robshaw—things you'll be interested in, Dane." With a cold face, Chance repeated what he had definitely learned of the mine superintendent's treachery. Hardwick listened to the end with growing wrath and indignation.

"Wal, the low-down ornery skunk!" he blazed. "What yuh tell me all fits in, Gilbert, or I'd never believed it. What gall!....Do yuh know where Robshaw is now?" He paused for

effect. "He's out there in the road, pretendin' to look after Molly. He jest showed up—said he got to thinkin' somethin' might happen—with you disappearin'—an' he wanted to protect her!"

THE WORDS sent a profound shock through Chance. He stood up slowly. Hardwick bent on him a piercing scrutiny, and took him by the arm in a firm grip. "None o' that now!" he said quickly.

"Then come on with me," rasped Chance unemotionally.

Reaching the street, they found more or less of a crowd standing about in front of the Red Eagle, mostly Mexicans. Bronson and the coroner held sway within. Molly's outfit still stood where it had been halted; two figures were standing close together at the wheel of the lead-wagon, dimly outlined in the starlight. Chance moved forward, Hardwick clinging to his arm. Dane's leg was giving him trouble, but he bore the pain in silence.

Robshaw turned as they came up. His pony, on which he had arrived, stood a few feet away, reins hanging. Staring boldly, the mining man waited for them to speak.

"Robshaw," said Dane heavily, "I gotta take you in custody....Got a gun on yuh?"

"No, I'm unarmed. What are you talking about, Hardwick?"

Molly had had an arm linked in his when they approached. She fell back at this. At Gilbert's curt gesture she moved father away, wonderment in her face.

"Wal, the charge is murder," responded the sheriff dryly.

"Murder!" Robshaw laughed uneasily. "That's simply ridiculous..... Mind telling me who I'm suppose to have killed?" Even now, his assurance was so complete that Chance would have doubted had he not known the bitter truth.

"Sime Wetherby—to begin at the beginnin'," said Hardwick.

"Why, man, he was shot here in El Castra! I was in the Belt at the time—"

"Never mind—you were behind it, Robshaw!" Chance hurled at him. "I'm carryin' the gun it was done with—your gun—"

Robshaw's eyes flamed up. "What rot!" he exploded wrathfully.

"Robshaw," Chance told him levelly, "throw your bluff. It'll get you nowhere. The ownership of this gun can be traced to you. When you learned I had it, you tried to scare me out—make me run. When that didn't work you attempted, with false charges, to disarm or kill me!"

"But why? Robshaw persisted hardily. "Why should I be fool enough to—"

"Wal, if *she* ain't a fool, I think Molly could guess," interjected Hardwick thinly. "Shall we ask her?"

Robshaw pursued that no further. "You can't prove a thing!" he sneered coldly. "This crazy hypothesis won't hold water for a minute!"

"We'll see what my witness can do, Robshaw!"

"Witness?" Robshaw froze, his pupils glinting. "Who's that, I'd like to know?"

"Sam Bo—"

Before Hardwick could finish, Robshaw exploded into violent action. The hand with which Dane was reaching for him was knocked aside; a rocky fist sent the sheriff spinning. Robshaw leaped for his horse then. But for Molly standing directly in line, he never would have made it; for Gilbert's gun was trained directly on the man. Too late the girl saw her mistake, and ran. Robshaw crouched behind the pony, fumbling madly in a saddle-pocket. A gun flashed in his hand. Unwilling to hit the horse, Chance let him shoot several times, while he danced out of range. At the first shot the animal spooked; Robshaw held it down curelly, but it spoiled his aim. At the last shot in the gun, the horse shied aside. Robshaw stood exposed. Chance threw down, and the bone-handled Colt crashed once. The slug caught Robshaw full in the chest, smashing it. He cried out gaspingly, and with the last of his strength hurled the empty gun. Then he slumped to the ground, the pony prancing away.

Seeing a twinkling glitter in the gloom, Chance attempted to duck. He was too late; the thrown gun struck him full in the head. There was a blinding flash, an engulfing roar, and he knew no more.

HE CAME to with his head on Molly's lap. He had been moved to the side of the trail; and with Hardwick's removal, for a wonder, he and Molly had been left to themselves. She started on seeing him open his eyes and leaned forward, her head silhouetted against the stars.

"Chance!" she whispered. "Chance—darling—don't frighten me again like that!"

Looking silently up into that lovely face, the fact that he was lying there in this manner grew suddenly unbearable to Gilbert. He struggled to a sitting position, facing her. "I'm all right," he muttered, shaking his head.

"For a moment I feared you were killed," she exclaimed agitatedly. He looked at her uncertainly.

"I was afraid you'd never look at me again, after what happened!"

"After turning your teaming contracts over to me—and sending mules and wagons to my yard?" Her voice broke. "After saving my life—and happiness — Chance?" Starlight jeweled the moisture on her lashes. "There is no telling what might have happened tonight but for you. How did you happen to come to El Castra?" Impelling urgency rounded and deepened her tone. "Were you—riding out of the country, Chance?"

"Reckon I was," he admitted slowly.

"I guessed as much....That is why I insisted on coming down here myself," she said simply. The import of her words staggered Chance. He struggled to his feet, and the act might have been symbolic.

"You mean—you've changed your mind — about me?" he managed huskily, as she faced him. "Because I haven't changed," he warned, scarcely daring to trust his own ears.

Her soft eyes were shining.

"But you said—"

"If I say it again, ever," she exclaimed, interrupting, "don't take no for an answer, Chance!"

For an instant Chance stood dumbfounded. "But I don't understand!" he cried. "Robshaw? he wasn't—you didn't—"

Molly shook her head. "I've suspected the truth for a long time, Chance; hoped against hope that I might be wrong. Dane Hardwick told me the whole story....My interest in Larry," she ended, cheeks reddening, "was—curiosity."

"What about Henricks?" persisted Chance. "He said—"

"What did he say?" she prompted, when he halted.

"That you'd promised to marry him the day he got on his feet!"

"He said that—after you'd given him excellent reason to believe you intended leaving the valley?" Molly's smile was tender. "Gust asked me to marry him regularly, once a day, Chance. I'm afraid he has his own stubborn, clumsy way of fighting for what he wants....Gust is a dear boy, but I never could take him seriously."

"Then—then—"

She moved close to him, confident and trusting. "Chance, I love you, worship you. You are my king—the king can do no wrong!"

Gilbert found no time at the moment for useless words. She melted into his arms in the happy consciousness that, if the silent eloquence of his lips went for anything, his reign would be a gentle one. Nor was her own an idle promise. After a long time she stirred in his arms with a sigh.

"Chance—" she breathed. "Will you tell me your given name, my dear?"

Chance began to laugh. "Shall I?" he mused aloud. "I suppose if you can stand it, I can....Charles Egbert—and that's the worst thing you can know about me!"

"Charles," she repeated unsmiling, ignoring with graceful tact the middle name he so obviously loathed. "I think I like that name for you ever so much better than Chance....May I call you Charley?"

THE END

WIRED FOR SIXES

By LEO CHARLES

Flint Lynn was washed up, old, and filled with a gnawing fear of bullets — a far thing from the reckless win-or-die trouble-shooter he'd once been for the railroad. And now he realized he didn't care any more — let the payroll robbery go through, he thought

"JUST ANSWER the question easy-like, partner—is No. 2 carrying a mail and express car?"

Flint Lynn turned leisurely from the telegraph key. "That sort of information ain't ever given out. A lot of trains were held up by the Matt Cooley gang fifteen years ago when they had a line on such—" He broke off suddenly—and the fear within him was a live and tangible thing—when he saw the gun.

It was held close to the youngster's right thigh, its muzzle resting on the battered desk top, invisible from the broad window that looked out over the tracks. There were the usual Saturday loungers out there to forlornly watch No. 2 go through. It was the event of the week, and Trailton for fleeting minutes was less lonely and remote.

For the lithe and easy-moving gunslinger to pull such a caper as this in broad daylight on a busy Saturday was unutterly foolish or inordinately confident.

With an effort Lynn pulled his eyes from the gun muzzle up to the hard dark eye of the gunman. His hands were shaking and beads of nervous perspiration glistened on his straggly gray mustache.

"I'm asking you again—real polite like," the youngster said in a soft voice. "Is the train carrying a mail and express car? Yuh can tell me or I can go through the dispatches myself....but you won't see me read them."

There was no mistaking the threat in the youngster's voice. That he would shoot without qualm was certain. In fact there was a deadly purposefulness in his every move that was vaguely familiar.

Lynn wet dry lips. This was the first gun he had faced since he had outgunned and downed four of Matt Cooley's gang long ago—only then he hadn't known the meaning of fear. Three bullets in his body had changed all of that. Even the sound of a gunshot since leaving the hospital had set his nerves to rioting. To face one was worse. Lynn knew a paralyzing panic.

"Yes—yes," he blurted. "It's pullin' one.'

The youngster laughed softly. "An' it's carrying the payroll for the railroad gang at the end of the line?'

Lynn hesitated. "That is something we don't get over the wires. Seems reasonable that it would though—but this is a week early for it. You made a bad guess.' '

The gun suddenly reached up and lashed sideways, knocking Lynn from the chair.

"I should kill you for that," the youngster said softly. "We knew it was coming this week — an' so did you. Don't try that kind of talk again. Get up! Sit in your chair an' go on grinnin' like a damn fool wire pounder."

Lynn got up slowly, pressing a bandanna to his bleeding cheek. His pale face was suddenly red in anger and frustration.

Damn fool wire pounder....

The contempt in the youngster's voice when he mouthed the words had been unmistakable. Lynn's hands began to shake and his stiffened right wrist was a sudden sawing of pain.

The youth laughed again and carelessly holstered the gun. "Big—bad—tough Flint Lynn,' he chuckled. "The toughest gunslinger on the whole St. Louis and Pike's Peak." He spat past

Lynn's hunched shoulder. "The ace trouble shooter of the railroad. Hell, mister, you ain't got nothin' left but a rep—an' you don't deserve that! My old man was right. He said you'd blubber when I pushed an iron at you. He's a tougher man—an' a better man—than yuh are, Flint, even after fifteen years in prison.' '

"You're?" Lynn's mouth was sagging.

"Yep. I'm Joe Cooley—an' Matt's youngest. Bill's the other—only he's got a bad temper. That's why he stayed in the hills with the old man. Matt didn't want him shootin' yuh. Said he was savin' yuh for himself—provided you had to be shot. But

things have a way of gettin' around an' the old man figured you had no more hankerin' to get shot, an' that you'd do as you were told. Fact is, He's cuttin' you in on this. Long as yuh don't mention this yuh go right on livin'. Now I consider that downright generous of the old man, considerin' what yuh done to him. Fust he was goin' to kill yuh, then he decided to use yuh instead. He's right smart, my old man is."

LYNN FLUSHED. He had known his fear for years—but thought it a private fear. Now it was an alive thing that gunslingers kicked around hideout campfires in all its shoddy cravenness. Strange, and somehow sardonic, that it should catch up to him on the last night of his stay in Trailton? Maybe it was just another signpost that meant he was coming to the end of the trail?

He had felt trail's end on his neck the day he had stepped out of the hospital. His gun wrist was stiff, the bones shattered, and he walked with a pronounced limp. The railroad construction boss, Preston, had met him and told him his trouble-shooting days were over. He had done a good job, a grand job, and all that bushwa. He would have a job with the road for the rest of his life. That had sounded good then. They had made a telegrapher of him—a telegrapher who never had a home. He was always just one town behind the construction crew—and now there was just one more town before the east and the west tracks merged—and when they merged Lynn knew there would be no job open for a pioneer telegrapher.

It meant that the railroad—Preston, especially—was going to shove him aside. There was no other reason for shipping him continually westward.

He was through. And, realizing it, he knew a greater bitterness.

A whistle sounded in the distance. The youngster looked at the wall clock and grinned.

"Right on time," he said. "Railroads always have been right considerate of my family. Pay's pretty good, too."

"You're holding it up here?" Lynn asked, aghast.

"Nope. Old man ain't that silly. Just one of our men will board her here. Me—I'm staying with yuh. Just wanted to be sure this was the right train.

Lynn thought he recognized the pattern — and it was Matt Cooley's work.

"I suppose," he said, "that I go outside and deliver the dispatches to the conductor. An' you're goin' to be standin' close enough to hear everythin' I say. You don't want any tipoff that a holdup is coming?"

"Exactly," the youngster said calmly. "Old man told me you'd be smart. Remember—no slip-up."

Lynn's lips twisted bitterly. His life against a tipoff? Hardly. The railroad could afford to lose a payroll, especially a railroad—with Preston as president now—that had Lynn ticketed for the scrap pile.

"There'll be no tipoff." His fear was gone as suddenly as it had come. "In fact—thinking over the idea—I rather like it." He picked up the dispatches and strode outside. Even his limp did not seem so pronounced.

He saw young Cooley nod to a swarthy and squat man in patched levis who lounged near the station wall. The man came away from the wall and walked slowly to the approaching train.

He would pull the cord that locked these new-fangled airbrakes, Lynn knew, as the train reached the locale where old Matt and his crew were waiting to swing aboard.

The conductor took the dispatches, and said: "Real nice train, this new one, Mr. Lynn. It's right comfortable, and carryin' Preston's daughter and grandson." There was respect in his voice, as there always was when most trainmen talked with Lynn. Now there seemed to be pride, too.

Lynn stiffened. "Melissa and her baby on this train?"

"Yeah. An' Preston, hisself, is comin' out in a day or so."

"Where—where's Melissa," Lynn said and started to shuffle toward

the steps of the car. A loud cough, almost a command, stopped him.

He turned. All but young Cooley's eyes were smiling benignly at him.

Lynn's eyes swept the train. Up near front the express car doors were open. An overalled clerk lounged carelessly in the doorway.

Frowning, Lynn limped back to the telegraph shack. Young Cooley trailed him. He motioned again to the squat man, and he swung aboard the train.

INSIDE THE shack, Lynn seated himself and stared morosely out the window. Cooley seated himself negligently on the side of the desk.

The telegraph started to click spasmodically. Young Cooley tensed. Lynn ignored it.

"Goin' overhead to Dodge City," he told young Cooley.

"An' it's saying?" The eyes were dangerous again.

Lynn shrugged. "Just more bushwa about driving the golden spike when the lines are connected in three days. It's goin' go be quite a shindig." His voice was bitter. He'd sacrificed his health and played more than a minor role in the building of this railroad empire—but he hadn't been invited to attend the final spiking. Only the big shots would be there....

The locomotive started to ring its bell. Lynn looked curiously at Cooley. "Time's gotta be wired ahead."

"I know that," Cooley said, "an' I know just how much wire pounding is necessary to get it out of here. Go ahead—an' nothin' else."

Wheels of the locomotive spun, and Lynn touched the key briefly, clearing No. 2 from Trailton.

"Yore right smart," Cooley smiled, "and cautious." He looked at the wall clock. "Now we're just goin' to sit here quiet-like for awhile so' you can't wire ahead anythin' as foolish as a warning. Get it?"

Lynn got it. He'd known it would be this way, and it didn't matter much. If Melissa and her son hadn't been on the train it wouldn't have mattered at all.

If it had not been for Matt Cooley and the crippling bullets of his gang, that young son might now be his. Melissa had been fond of him—and Preston had apparently approved of him—when he had been in his trouble-shooting heyday. Melissa had traveled with her father when he was only the construction gang boss. When he became a crippled telegrapher, Lynn had avoided her. And she, in turn, had followed her father to the home office and there married a young executive. The boy, Lynn thought, now was probably eleven....

The key started to chatter again. Lynn listened and controlled the muscles in his face. This was what he had spotted as strange with No. 2.

"What?" young Cooley said.

Lynn shrugged. "More bushwa about the ceremonies. It's goin' overhead. Some of the big shots are on the train due here in two hours."

"Due here?" Cooley said in surprise.

Lynn nodded. "Yeah. An' it's the train I'm due to take for what's probably my last ride. It's takin' me to the end of the line and bringing in a young telegrapher here. I'll just pull my key an' he'll hook up his—an' that'll end the Trailton story."

"Work train?" Cooley was frowning at the floor. "My old man didn't know about that." Suddenly he cursed. "That's it," he ranted. "I knew there was something damned funny about that train. Everybody was careless as hell. It ain't carryin' the payroll."

"I wouldn't know," Lynn lied. And he hadn't known until five minutes before when the wires had talked.

Young Cooley shook his head sadly. "My old man is goin' to be very mad about this. It'll be his first caper since his parole—an' it'll be a bust. I think somebody is goin' to be hurt—hurt very much. Railroads. Hah! Always double-crossing men with peaceful 'tentions. It is sad, is it not?"

"It is sad—very sad," Lynn repeated like an automatic man. If old Matt Cooley found out that Melissa—the daughter of his hated enemy, Preston—was on that train...and the money was not—Lynn repressed a shudder.

His hand made an involuntary movement to the key.

Cooley's gun came out and crashed against his injured wrist. Lynn slumped back in the chair, white with pain.

"You say when the new man comes you just pull your key, eh?" Cooley said. "I think maybe we'd best pull it now. No temptation to wire ahead that way." With one motion of his hand he pulled the wires loose and hurled the key and trailing wires across the room. "I was goin' to wait with you two hours, my friend. Now I think not."

Lynn started to rise in protest. He saw the reversed gun start its arc downward and tried to roll with the blow. He was too late. The room tilted and seemed to cave in on him in utter darkness.

THE DISTANT clanging of the bell that seemed to come closer and then clang louder brought him back to consciousness. The bell kept ringing insistently and when he forced open his eyes he saw Preston's face close to his. He was in the closet of the shack, and the door hung ajar on smashed hinges.

Preston got his hands under Lynn's shoulders and lifted him upright. Lynn thought vaguely that although Preston was a big shot in a soft office now he still had the strength of a mule.

He led him through the curious ring of faces of the train crew in the outer office and placed him in a chair.

A kid in his teens, with long hair falling over his face, was wiring in his key. His haste was almost frantic, and to some extent ludricious to Lynn. Sending a warning now would not do a bit of good. Young Cooley had said he would wait two hours to make sure Lynn didn't wire a warning ahead. That two hours was up—and No. 2 already had been stopped—and plundered—of what? A two-hour run was about midway between Trailton and the final construction camp.

"Let's have it, Flint," Preston said. "Just what happened?"

Lynn lifted dazed eyes to Preston's face. The big man seemed as friendly as usual, and as he looked at Lynn there was compassion in his eyes.

Lynn gave it to him straight. Of young Cooley, the menacing gun, and the belated knowledge that the payroll was not on the train.

There was sudden silence as Lynn finished. The train crew were looking at him in disbelief. Only Preston's eyes seemed understanding.

From the outer circle, Lynn heard a man say: "Big tough Flint Lynn took a pushin' around from a punk kid. I'll take these myths of the old days with a side order of applesauce from now on."

"Hell, that's why he's a telegrapher," another said. "Nerve's gone."

"Shut up!" Preston roared. "Outside to the train. We're goin' through. If I know Matt Cooley.... he'll be waiting to see us now. It's shooting time again, men. Nobody has to come that don't want to. Somebody get me a belt and gun."

Lynn stiffened in surprise. This sounded like the old hell-for-leather Preston, not just the formal and dignified signature that Lynn had come to associate with the man.

The muttering crew went outside. The telegraph set up a chattering. The young operator said there had been no word from No. 2 since leaving Trailton. An emergency tie-in could have been made had there been a telegrapher with a key aboard, Lynn knew. Apparently there had not been one aboard.

He got groggily to his feet, searching for his personal key. He found the remains of it finally in the stove, and felt curiously lost. A telegrapher without a key was like a gunman without a gun.

Preston was watching him with curious eyes. "Coming with us, Lynn. You were to go to the last camp with us, you know, and hook in there."

Lynn thought of Matt Cooley and his gang waiting for the work train to appear—and repressed a shudder. It was certain bullets would fly.

"No point in goin' now," he said. "Ain't got a key now to hook in." To himself he silently thanked young

Cooley for giving him this excuse to dodge gunfire.

"I guess you're not hankering much for this last post?" Preston asked.

Last post. Lynn got it. Here was admission from Preston's own lips that he was at trail's end—a verbal tossing of the one-time hero of the road on the scrap heap.

"I just don't hanker to get myself shot up anymore," Lynn said.

Preston nodded somberly. "I can understand that...and it's too bad, Flint. We need a man like you in a spot like this." He abruptly turned and strode from the shack for the train.

Biting his lips, Lynn watched him go. Whatever happened to the railroad—and Preston—was all right with him. Then he thought of Melissa and her youngster—and that was not all right with him.

He pushed the young telegrapher aside and entered the closet. From beneath a pile of dusty newspapers he took two gun belts and buckled them on. He grimaced at the gun on his right hip and his stiffened right wrist. Perhaps — just perhaps — the gun on the left—after all these years of inaction—well—ah Hell....

Bareheaded, he ran limpingly for the work train and swung on the passenger coach trailer just as it started to move.

PRESTON SAW him coming and grinned. He pushed over on the seat and said: "Sit down, Flint. I knew you'd come."

Lynn unbuckled his right gun and dropped it in Preston's lap. "Put it on," he said unsmilingly, "I think you're goin' to know how bullets feel. An' they don't feel anything like the soft chairs you big shots set in when they keep shovin' a man farther and farther toward the edge until he falls off."

Preston started, then silently strapped on the belt.

"How do you size it up, Flint?" Preston asked.

Lynn watched the telegraph poles flash by and began counting them.

"We're goin' too fast. Run on average train speed for one hour and fifty minutes—then slow down to a crawl. That should put us on some flat land where No. 2 was held up. You'll get your chance at Matt Cooley—an' he'll get his at you."

Preston motioned to the conductor and minutes later the train slowed.

Preston was biting his lips nervously. "I don't like this atall, Flint. Going after a bunch of train robbers by slow motion don't make sense, and slowing up so that they'll have an open crack at us makes less sense."

"No-o," Lynn said doubtfully. "Well, young Cooley will have had four hours by the time we reach the spot. By ridin' hard he could make it —an' I know how Matt Cooley's thinks. He'll be waitin', an' it's safer to approach him slow. If he has had time enough there's going to be a road block that could wreck a fast train. A wreck now—with the east and west just to be joined—wouldn't do the railroad any good."

"A stick-up is going to do the line's reputation less good. Matt Cooley isn't taking this payroll; I'll die first. We tried to outfox any bandits who might have had an idea like this. That's why I came on a few days early and had the payroll switched to this work train. But we're not outfoxed—or outfought—yet."

"No-o," Lynn again said doubtfully.

"Dammit, Flint," Preston protested, "you act so sure that Cooley will succeed that if I didn't know you I'd swear that you were hoping he would succeed."

"Maybe I am," Lynn said. "It might be the cheaper cost to pay." His eye thoughtfully scanned the workers. At least a dozen were carrying rifles obtained at Trailton. There was an occasional six-gun. The guards were spread the length of the car on both sides. They laughed and they joked like school kids on an outing. Lynn sighed.

"Guards on the engine, too, I suppose?" Lynn asked.

Preston nodded.

"Bring 'em back here," Lynn ordered. "Send word to your engineer

to stop peacefully if he sees a road block. The money here?"

Preston savagely kicked a metal square box on the floor. "That's it—and it's staying here. The reputation of the road depends on that money staying here. And we got enough men to defend it."

"How many men you got—how many guns you got—nothing will mean a damn," Lynn said again. "And if I was you I wouldn't be thinkin' too much of the money or the reputation of the road. I'd be thinkin' of Melissa and young John."

"Damnation! What they got to do with it. They're still in St. Louis. You know, Fling, I haven't seen that pair in over a year. I was sorta hoping Melissa would come out to see the road completed since she saw too much of road building and its rougher side in the past."

LYNN STARED moodily out the window. "I think she prepared a surprise for you," he said. "Probably wanted to make the completion of the road a cause for a real celebration and reunion. I heard she and young John were on No. 2."

Preston stared open-mouthed, then he began cursing as only a former boss of a road gang could. Finally the red fury of his face subsided, and he asked:

"What are we going to do, Flint. You're an old specialist in these matters."

"I thought you had forgotten that," Lynn said bitterly. "It's been a long time an' a lot of telegraph shacks."

"Those shacks aren't so bad," Preston barked. "I've spent some time in them too and—"

'I'm not talkin' about that. I just said that it was taking yuh a long time to remember. Y'know I helped build this road, too, but I didn't see any invite to that gold spike drivin'. No, nothing like that. Just another notice to move on.'

"So that's it," Preston said wonderingly. "Flint, you're a sentimentalist—and you're getting old... But that isn't here or there. What are we going to do?"

"Yes, I'm gettin' old," Lynn agreed. "An' we're goin' to do exactly what Matt Cooley tells us to do it he's added up this caper the way I figger he added it."

Preston sagged back against the hard cushions. Lynn noticed that Preston, too, looked old. He sighed again. He felt the train slow to a crawl.

Hell, everything had to come to an end....

He got up, limped to the vestibule. There he turned and said: "No shootin' men until I give the word. Remember—no shootin'."

The train continued its crawl for nearly fifteen minutes, then jarred to a stop.

Lynn stepped to the ground.

Up front he could see railroad ties criss-crossing the track in a hastily-constructed block. Out on the flatland a lone rider sat his horse. He was leading a saddled but riderless horse.

At Lynn's motion he cautiously approached. A blue bandanna covered his face.

Lynn scanned the mesique and cactus. None could effectively conceal hidden gunmen. He sighed again and grudgingly admitted to himself that Matt Cooley was an artist of sorts in his choosen line.

When the rider came up, Lynn asked: "Have you both of them or just one?"

The voice behind the bandanna was muffled. "Just the boy—Preston's grandson."

In the car behind him Lynn heard Preston start cursing.

"Money for the boy," Lynn said matter-of-factly.

The bandit chuckled. "Yore callin' the turns just like you was old Matt hisself. Yuh must be Flint Lynn?"

"I'm Lynn. Where's the boy?"

The rider motioned to a rock strewn hillock marred with prairie dog holes. It was less than a quarter mile away. "Behind that. Tie the payroll on the saddle of the horse I'm leadin' an' when the horse comes in back of the hill again the boy'll be ridin' him."

(Continued On Page 96)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 94)

"Sounds fair enough," Lynn admitted. "Only I always been sorta a cautious man. I want to see that the boy is all right first—an' I aim to see that personally—an' first."

The bandit seemed uncertain. "Old Matt didn't say anything about handlin' the deal thisaway. How we going to know you got the payroll?"

"Send two men out with it, Preston," Lynn called.

PRESTON CAME out with the men, breathing hard. He unlocked the box and flung back the lid. It was loaded with greenbacks and bags of silver.

"Carry it out halfway to that hill," he told the two men. "Leave it there. Then come back here."

"I don't like this, Flint," Preston said.

"I don't either," Lynn said, stiffly mounting the saddle of the riderless horse. "That box now is within gunshot range of the train and the hill. It's all even for shootin' if anything has happened to the boy—an' Matt's bunch tries to grab it."

"The boy's all right," the bandit said angrily, his hand making an involuntary motion towards his gun.

Lynn flinched. This man was mean—crazy mean. The eyes above the bandanna were filled with hate for Lynn. They looked like Matt's eyes when he had turned to Lynn in the courtroom after hearing sentence Only this man had not been more than a button then. It seemed to Lynn all this had happened several lifetimes ago....

"Maybe he's all right," Lynn said. "I aim to see him safely away before you come out to pick up that money—an' understand I'm just making a deal for the boy."

Preston was standing near the horse's head. As Lynn talked his left hand kept tapping the saddle horn. Preston's gaze finally shiffted to the hand. The index finger was leaping like an alive thing.

"It's yore deal," the bandit said. "Come along. I think old Matt sorta wants to see yuh anyway. Yuh said the deal was just for the boy. I'm tellin' him that."

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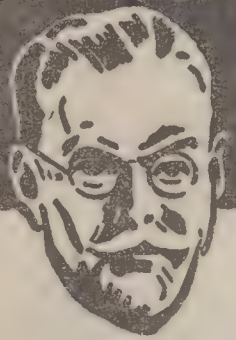

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 96)

Then to Preston. "Yuh heard what he said. Send some men to get the ties off the rails. An' when that boy comes out get the hell away from here fast. We'll be keepin' this trouble-shooter for a few hours just to make shore than ain't any mistakes or no posses on our tail."

"I can't stand for that," Preston shouted. "Take the money and just give me back my grandson."

His eyes in his downbent head never left Lynn's left hand. Tap..tap.. tap...

The bandit pulled his mount around with a savage yank on the reins. Lynn followed, the saddle jostling like an unaccustomed thing beneath him. His mouth was grim, his eyes bleak, his every nerve screaming in torment to dig in his heels and flee —flee anywhere except to that hill behind which Matt Cooley waited. He rode on.

He thought he heard Preston shout, "You always were, Flint, you always were!"

Lynn's mouth twisted bitterly. After all this was his road too—he had helped build it—had left the best past of himself forever indelibely imprinted in it.

He was a fool—and he knew it—but, Hell! everything has to end sometime...

The hill, as they approached, was higher than Lynn had imagined. It made a perfect cone. The bandit continued to direct a steady flow of curses at Lynn.

He plunged without hesitation over the ridge of the cone. Lynn followed.

At the bottom, in the mud, were four horses, two men and a small boy.

As the riders swept down into the cone two guards with rifles who had been facing the train slid down from the edge of the cone.

YOUNG COOLEY, his face and clothing caked with sweat and dirt, grinned at Lynn and said: "Yuh're almost as smart as my old man—almost."

A tall bent old, clean shaven and with stranggling white hair, rose tiredly from a rock.

Lynn dismounted. "Hello, Matt."

"Howdy, Flint. Figgerin' on shootin' my gang from under me agin' or do I hold all the sixes in the deck?"

"You saw what we did. The money's layin' out there. Just put the boy on this horse an' send him out."

Matt Cooley's white eyebrows skated upward. "So that's the play. Yuh plannin' on stayin' around?"

"Knowin' yuh, Matt, I figgered that's the way you would want it."

"Meybee so, meybee so. But times do change with years."

The boy, eyes dancing with excitement, grabbed Lynn's hand. "Hully gee!" he said shrilly. "You're Flint Lynn. I knew you'd be around. Mother's always tellin' me how you busted up train robber gangs. Gee. An' this was a real one. They shot up the train an' when they didn't find what they wanted they took me. They didn't hurt nobody an' didn't even take any wallets or watches." This last rather disappointedly. "But, hully gee! ain't I goin' to have somethin' to tell the kids when I get back to St. Louie. Wow!"

Lynn swung him up into the saddle. "Go to the train, younker."

"Yuh know," the boy shrilled again, "Mom's told me I could watch you drive that golden spike. She wanted to see it too. I never thought I'd see yuh out here and—"

"Drive-the-golden-spike," Lynn repeated incredulously. "Why I—I—"

"Heck!" the kid said. "I just forgot. You was to be made chief 'patcher or something. Anyway you would be boss of all telegrams. Only it was to be a surprise. Now I went and ruined it and—"

There was a sudden stinging in Lynn's eyes. He grabbed the bridle, swung the horse around. A slap sent it plunging up the slope, the boy wildly clinging to the saddle.

He turned then to face old Matt.

The old bandit's eyes were wary, almost young and alert again. He looked at Lynn's stiff right wrist and the gun in the left holster. "I thought you would be afraid of lead. Maybe I was wrong?"

Lynn remained silent. He could feel his heart beating against his ribs. Yes, he was afraid of lead, deathly

(Continued On Page 100)

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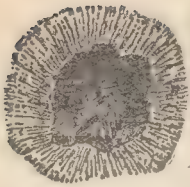

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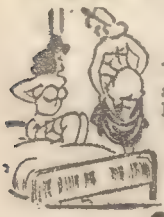

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(Continued From Page 99)

afraid of it. But maybe if it killed and didn't just wound it wouldn't be so bad this time....

"Matt," he said, "I didn't promise to pay that money out there to yuh. All I said was that I wanted to see that the boy was all right and that he got back safe. Yuh know, he might have been my kid if it hadn't been for you. It's within shooting range of both sides now."

The bandit jerked the blue bandanna down from his livid face. "That's what the polecat said all right. Why the double crossing—" He made a frantic grab for his gun.

Young Cooley reached up and twisted it from his hand. "Like I told yuh," he said half apologetically, "my brother Bill's got a helluva temper."

"That's right," old Matt said. "It's too early for Flint to die. Just what's the rest of your play, Flint. The boy should be almost back to the train by now."

"While I was talkin' to the brainless one of the Cooley family," Lynn said levelly, "I also was talking to Preston in dot-dash. I told him: 'It wouldn't be right for a railroad to get a bad rep by opening a through line with a holdup—that I thought I had put as much as he had into it—I thought I should have more than a little say-so in how it was run—that I was a railroad trouble-shooter first last and always—an' that when he heard the shots to get the hell out there and pick up the box and get the hell out pronto.'"

"This was before you knew about that double spike business an' when yuh thought Preston had yuh ticketed for the scrap pile?"

"Yes."

OLD MATT shook his head in amazement. "Never will understand yuh railroad men. All right, boys. Get to the top of the rim and keep those railroad polecats away from that box. We're takin' it the hard way."

"But this—" Bill Cooley leaped at Lynn.

Old Matt shoved him sprawling

(Continued On Page 102)

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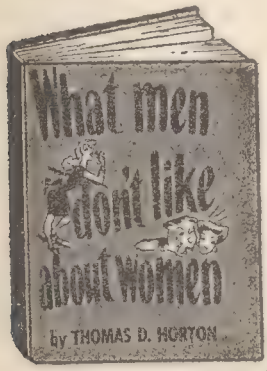

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(Continued From Page 100)

and contemptuously threw him his rifle.

"Flint an me got somethi'n' to settle personally," he grated. "Get up on that rim."

"If there's no shooting," young Cooley said softly, "an' Lynn should just walk out of here, then we could just ride away without any trouble."

"Logical," Lynn said. "But your Pa and I don't play it thataway. It's all or nuttin'—or neither of us would be worth a damn on our jobs again."

"Thats right,'" Old Matt rasped. "Now get up there and start shootin' even if there ain't nuttin' to shot at. You're Cooley's, remember. Just like the railroad, we got a reputation to keep us." He turned slowly to Lynn. "There hasn't been a night in fifteen years that I haven't thought of killin' yuh. Can yuh draw?"

"Yes." Lynn's stomach was a gnarled knot and he struggled for breath. He had known it would be hard, but not this hard.

"Then draw." With the motion old Matt's hand went down and out as Lynn's cumbersome left hand fought for his gun. It was a losing battle. He knew it long before he saw the hole appear in old Matt's forehead and saw him fall. Only then did the echoing of the shot crack down through the cone.

He saw the two Cooleys and their two bandit friends swing around on the slope.

Lynn tried a left handed shot at Bill Cooley and knew he had missed. He frantically tried to shift the gun to his stiff right hand. Cooley's shot knocked his hat from his head. Lynn fired again, and Bill Cooley bent in the middle. From the corner of his eye he saw the younger Cooley aim downward at him. Then a pile driving thrust against Lynn's shoulder took him off his feet. The old, numbing and familiar pain was there again.

Prone, he rolled to face young Cooley, but young Cooley was rolling like an inert sack down the slope.

The staccato barking of guns at the rim of the cone were making the hill a bedlam. Lynn saw another bandit claw at his side and try to crazily walk up the hill before falling back-

ward.

He got the fourth one in his sights, flush between the eyes.

Lynn was looking down at his right hand in amazement. The stiffness that he had for years believed to have sealed his doom as a trouble-shooter was gone. The hand was steady, as apparently adroit as ever.

He knew then that the long years of pounding a telegraph key had restored a great degree of suppleness. His left shoulder was a sea of pain again...but a different pain... a pain without fear.

Three men came sliding down the far side of the hill.

One of them told Lynn: "It's pretty hard to hold up a train on the flats without being seen. We were ridin' range when the first one was stopped. We just rode in from the blind side of the hill and have been watching things develop for over an hour. It was right interesting. Do yuh think there's any reward.

"Sure," Lynn said. "When Preston gets here ask him about a golden spike that I'm to get and supposedly drive. I give that to you. An' ordinary guy just does the best he can with ordinary tools. Sometimes even a bent spike can hold a rail if it was a good spike to start out with. I'm sorta gamblin' that an ordinary spike will be okay to hold this road together—that an' a lot of things that ain't on costs sheets."

THE END

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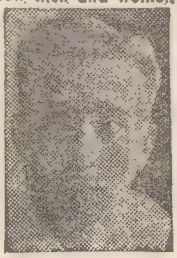

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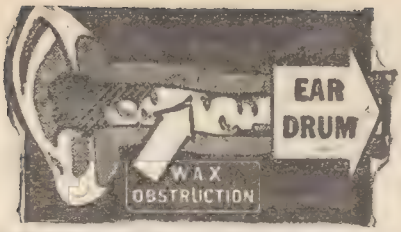

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(Continued On Page 106)

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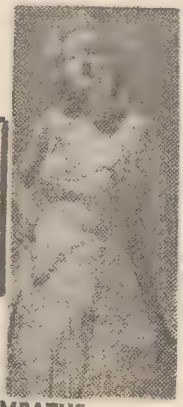

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"Makes one feel wonderful."
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(Continued From Page 104)

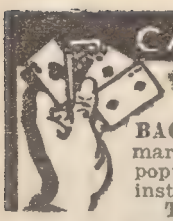
awhile, sure enough, there was nothing he wanted more than to get out of the California climate that made everything grow that way. When he got to be a hundred, he still liked it fine, and at a hundred and fifty he'd still have sworn he'd never leave. At two hundred, he was beginning to grow just a mite weary of seeing the same old things every day, and at two hundred and fifty, he decided he'd had enough. He was so tired of being strong and healthy, and just so doggone smart from having lived so long that he figured he'd had about enough.

He told everybody goodbye, and he got hold of his sons, and told them he was goin' away. He was going to die, he said, because it was a cinch he just couldn't manage to do it in California. Only one thing he wanted, he told them, and that was, after he was dead, he wanted to have his body brought back and buried in the country he loved.

Well, of course they agreed to what their dear old father wanted, and sure enough, he wasn't gone two days before his hair turned white; a week later he was a worn-out old cripple, and within two weeks after he left, why he just plumb fell down and died of old age. His sons had his body brought back to the mission country where he had lived so long, and they took up their picks and shovels, and they put on their very best Sunday mourning clothes. Then they all climbed up on the top of his favorite hill that looked out over the Pacific Ocean, where he could hear the waves beating up on the shore till the Judgement Day, and they dug him a hole nice and deep, but not so far he couldn't feel the sun through the ground.

Then when they were all done digging, they opened up the coffin for to take one last look at their beloved father, and as it happened it was a bright and cheerful sunshiny California day. They opened up that coffin, and the sun's rays fell down on that man who'd died out there across the border, and no sooner did that California sun hit the white-haired old gent, than he sat bolt up-

(Continued On Page 108)



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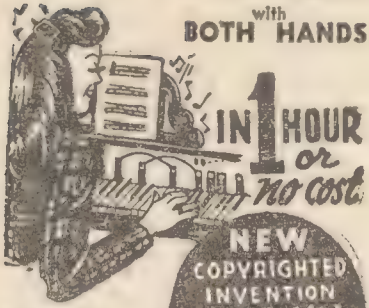

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(Continued From Page 106)

right, there in his coffin, and said, "Well I never..is this the way to treat your father boys?"

AND THEY used to have animals that *was* animals back in those days too. If you can find me a mule like the one my chum used to own, I'd give a pretty penny for it. *That* animule was trained; that was one obedient piece of flesh. There were plenty of things that mule could do that I won't bother even to tell you about, because I suppose there is a mule around somewhere even nowadays that could almost match it. But there is one thing that mule did that I will bet you can't beat. There never was another mule like it, and there never will be any more, that's for sure.

Well, one day my friend got a hurry-up call from a pal of his. Seems like the kids was sick, and this fellow, who was homesteadin', and out in the woods pretty much by himself, he needed some supplies, and couldn't leave the sick kids to get 'em, so my chum, who owned this mule, he got holden the supplies that *his* chum needed, and he got on his little beast, and he set out right over the mountain to deliver the goods. Well, that mule was making a nice fast pace all the way, but my friend, he was so worried about *his* friend, out there alone with the sick kids, that he just didn't realize that poor animal was doin' the best it could, and he kept tellin' it to go faster, and it kept right on a-going faster every time it was told, until finally, my friend he was ridin' as fast as if he had of been on a horse. That mule was just galloping around that mountain trail like nothin' you ever saw, and certainly nothing you ever will see nowadays.

Well, my chum he went too far. One time too many he told that poor beast to go faster still, and there was nothing for it to do but try. Only trouble was, they was just comin' to a curve in the trail, and the poor mule was going so fast he just naturally couldn't take that bend like he ought to have, and over they went, man, beast, and supplies. Well, at first, for a minute, my friend he thought the

(Continued On Page 110)

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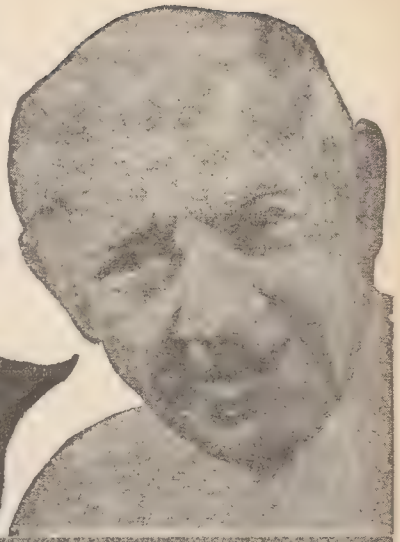

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 108)

animal had just decided this time to show some *real* speed, but it didn't take him very long to figure out that the solid ground underneath was awful far beneath. Well, I will say for him, he did some fast thinking. It was too late to tell the mule to slow down or go back. The beast would of done it if he could, but my friend could see even *his* mule couldn't do that, so he did the only thing he could do under the circumstances, and he just yelled out real loud, he yelled, "Whoa!"

That was one well-trained mule. He heard that "Whoa!" and he stopped, like he did every time, stopped on a dime. He just stopped right there where he was, and my friend, he sat there a-chewin and a-cursin, and had to wait till somebody else come along the trail with a rope to lasso him back on again.

OF COURSE, there are some of these stories a man can't put much stock in. I have done my bit of fishing in my day, and I have done some of it in the Columbia River too, and I know there are plenty of fish to be had for the angling in that water, but I have had some trouble tryin' to talk myself into believing the story about the man who caught 264 salmon in one day, and then, when he had all he could carry home, took them across river by walking on the backs of the other fish.

And the other one an old liar told me about how he killed a cougar is a little bit hard for a healthy man to swallow. Seems, he says, he was a-walking down a mountain trail after being out with a logging party all the day, and this here cougar sprang right for him. He didn't have time to reach for his gun, and he could see it was going to be a bare-fisted fight betwixt himself and that wild animal. Now, he says, if it was morning, he would kind of enjoyed it, but he was plumb tired out from totin' logs, and he hadn't much heart for a fight, so he just stood stock still where he was standing, and he reached out his long right arm where that cougar was leaping, and the animal, with his jaws wide open for the

kill, he leaped right onto that old liar's fist. Fast as he could, this old fellow says, he grabbed hold of the spot just front of the cougar's tail, and he pulled back sharp and hard, thus turning the animal inside out, and leaving it that way while it tickled itself to death with its tail and toes. There are some things it is just asking too much of a man to believe.

SOME PEOPLE, though, just seem like they won't believe anything you tell them, no matter how many other folks will swear to it and testify. Now we got one hero out here in the old west country that we all know lived and died out here. Folks from the east keep a-comin' out and listening to our tales, and going home again, and if they don't come out and call us liars, they settle for talkin' about legends, which is the same thing a little more polite.

But there is one story I will keep on a-telling them, every time one of em says this Oregon fog is thick as it is in London. I never got to London, and I understand it's somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean in the East, but I will swear there are no fogs, in this London, England, or anywhere else, including even San Francisco, which has some powerful fogs; there just plain aren't any fogs anywhere that will beat an Oregon fog when it really wants to put on a show.

So the story I keep telling when they talk about this London pea-soup is about the old loggers who set out to shingle a roof. Well they set out to do a job on the roof of their ranchhouse, and they had plenty of shakes, and plenty of muscle. They weren't the sort you'd find today, who'd quit for lunch in an hour, and quit for the day in two; there were real loggers, and if they wanted a shingled roof, they wasn't going to quit till they had it. So they set out shinglin' and they shingled all day. The fog come down, and it was thicker than ever they'd seen it before, but the job wasn't done, and they was goin' to have a shingled roof before sundown, whether or not they could see the sun through the fog. It was easy

(Continued On Page 112)

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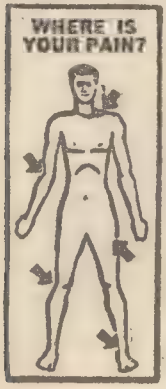

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working, cause that fog got so thick it was holding them up almost like water would.

After a while it got even thicker, and it got so they couldn't see their own hands, or see to find the shakes to shingle with, or see the roof. But they just kept on a-goin, because they were bound and determined to see that roof shingled before sundown. Well, they didn't stop that job until the boss came around, and then he laughed so hard and he laughed so long they just naturally had to quit to find out what he was laughing at. They tried to feel their way offen that roof, and they didn't find out until then that they'd been clear off the roof, and a-shinglin' the fog for forty feet back.

But then they were Paul Bunyan's loggers.

THE END

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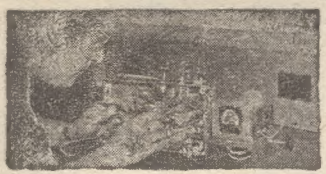

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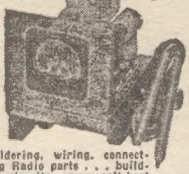

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